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Stylistic destinations

the prosodies of R.S. Thomas, 1936-2000

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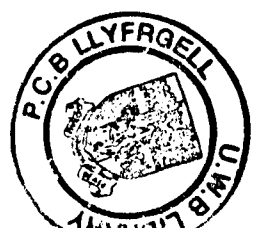
STYLISTIC DESTINATIONS:
THE PROSODIES OF R. S. THOMAS, 1936-2000

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Summary

Welsh poet R. S. Thomas (1913-2000), who published for over six decades, evolved from a sub-Georgian imitator in the 1930s to one of Britain's most stylistically-innovative poets in the latter part of the century. This thesis traces Thomas's developmental journey by means of close reading, analyzing his various prosodies, including metrical, accentual, linear, and visual. R. S. Thomas's prosodies were largely an extension of his emotional interiors, but there is also in his work an integral relationship between style and place; the environment in which he wrote poems was consistently reflected in the rhythm, language, and structure of the poetry itself. In order to shed light on the workings of Thomas's prosodies, this thesis makes use of poetic theory and examines Thomas's responses to key influences: the Bible; writings in theology and popular science; and the literary works of Irish, American, Welsh, and English writers.

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Abbreviations

SF	<i>The Stones of the Field</i> (1946)
AL	<i>An Acre of Land</i> (1952)
SYT	<i>Song at the Year's Turning</i> (1955)
PS	<i>Poetry for Supper</i> (1958)
T	<i>Tares</i> (1961)
BT	<i>The Bread of Truth</i> (1963)
P	<i>Pietá</i> (1966)
NBF	<i>Not That He Brought Flowers</i> (1968)
YO	<i>Young and Old</i> (1972)
LS	<i>Laboratories of the Spirit</i> (1975)
WI	<i>The Way of It</i> (1977)
F	<i>Frequencies</i> (1978)
BHN	<i>Between Here and Now</i> (1981)
LP	<i>Later Poems</i> (1983)
IT	<i>Ingrowing Thoughts</i> (1985)
EA	<i>Experimenting with an Amen</i> (1986)
WA	<i>Welsh Airs</i> (1987)
ERS	<i>The Echoes Return Slow</i> (1988)
C	<i>Counterpoint</i> (1990)
MHT	<i>Mass for Hard Times</i> (1992)
NTF	<i>No Truce With the Furies</i> (1995)
R	<i>Residues</i> , ed. M. Wynn Thomas (2002)
A	<i>Autobiographies</i> , trans. Jason Walford Davies (1997)
SP	<i>R.S. Thomas: Selected Prose</i> , ed. Sandra Anstey (rev. ed., 1995)

Introduction

In his introduction to *Modernism: A Guide to Criticism* (2007), Michael Whitworth discusses the strengths and weaknesses of a New Critical approach to poetry. More specifically, he observes that the New Criticism, with its emphasis on form and technique, “provides powerful tools for interpretive criticism” but is neglectful of “history, politics, and culture”. While it is therefore helpful at the textual level, New Criticism “excludes any analysis of the cultural conditions which make it possible for the text to exist”.¹ One readily acknowledges the limitations of a text-in-a-vacuum approach to poetry criticism, but one is nevertheless quick to point out another critical extreme, one that is in fact much more common: a propensity to emphasize all things *extra*-textual, especially the “history, politics, and culture” surrounding both poet and poetry (in that order). In this brand of criticism, the poem is always subordinate to an idea, a theme, a socio-political viewpoint, a historical setting, or the biography of the poet. In other words, the poetry itself is ultimately marginalized. Perhaps understandably, given the cultural position which R. S. Thomas consciously took in Wales, a great deal of criticism on his work has been of this variety. Such criticism has done much to create a contextual climate *for* his poetry, but it has also, with few exceptions, failed to engage with the styles and techniques *of* his poetry—its structures, forms, registers, shapes, and movements; in short, its prosody.

One reason this matters so much is that without studies to examine R. S. Thomas’s craft—studies which critics can refer to, respond to, develop, and refute—opinions regarding the importance, and indeed the quality, of his poetry will have very little on which to base their claims. To quote M. Wynn Thomas slightly out of context, “Until his poetry is thus put to the test [. . .], there can be no knowing precisely how

¹ *Modernism: A Guide to Criticism*, ed. Michael H. Whitworth (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 47.

good it is, or what its strengths and weaknesses are”.² In the case of R. S. Thomas, critical appraisal has been all over the map. For example, Gwyn Jones suggests that Thomas might very well be “the finest, conscious craftsman writing verse in English today”,³ but Robert Minhinnick writes that Thomas “has been consistently overrated as a writer”,⁴ and John Wain asserts that Thomas, having taken “flight from form” in the early 1970s, subsequently became nothing more than an essayist masquerading as a poet.⁵ There is, of course, nothing wrong with differences of opinion, which are both inevitable and necessary. There is, however, nearly *always* something wrong with assertion that lacks corroborating demonstration. Most recently, Andrew Duncan has been guilty of this, falling back on stereotypical adjectives to describe R. S. Thomas—“gruff, grumpy, comminatory, patriarchal”⁶—and making broad declarations, such as “[Thomas’s] poetry is all moulded by political beliefs” and “his work, though highly controlled, is undistinguished in style”.⁷ But of all Duncan’s assertions, the most revealing is this: “Thomas’s gales of disapproval *assume authority*”.⁸ Ironically, Duncan is himself doing precisely this, for he offers no poetic evidence to substantiate his claims, instead drawing from popular caricatures of Thomas and announcing them as true. Such assertions do not help us to analyze and evaluate poetry. This is also the case, one hastens to add, of criticism which heaps unsupported approval on poetry. In fact, it is perhaps even more damaging to praise poetry in the absence of demonstration. One can celebrate R. S. Thomas as the pre-eminent religious poet of the modern age, or the greatest British poet since Wordsworth, or any number of things, but until someone demonstrates *what* it is that makes him great—and subject matter alone does not make him great, just as an

² “Reviewing R. S. Thomas”, *Books in Wales* (Summer, 1993): 7.

³ “R.S. Thomas at Seventy”, Broadcast on BBC Radio 3, 7 Dec, 1983. Reproduced from *Waiting: The Religious Poetry of Ronald Stuart Thomas, Welsh Priest and Poet*, by M. J. J. van Buren (Dordrecht: ICG Printing, 1993) 179.

⁴ Robert Minhinnick, “Living With R. S. Thomas”, *Poetry Wales* 29.1 (1993): 12.

⁵ *Professing Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1977) 107.

⁶ *Centre and Periphery in Modern British Poetry* (Liverpool, Liverpool UP 2005) 212.

⁷ *Ibid.* 210.

⁸ *Ibid.* 212, italics added.

iconic celebrity does not—then praise has no gravity. It is less like criticism and more like unsubstantiated rumour. The primary purpose of this thesis is not to examine existing critical assertions but to examine the techniques of the poems, specifically their prosody, and in so doing to test existing critical positions. Judgements are made, and conclusions reached, not in the light (or the dark) of aesthetic partiality, but through a close examination of prosody.

By prosody, one has in mind all aspects of style and technique by which R. S. Thomas influences and/or directs our experience when reading a given poem. Harvey Gross writes, “It is prosody and its structures which articulate the movement of feeling in a poem, and render to our understanding meanings which are not paraphrasable”.⁹ Indeed, the most fundamental “meaning” of a poem is not an extractable idea, theme, or moral; it cannot be set down as prose. Criticism can (and must, if it is to be worthy of the name) clarify poetry and/or make us see it in a new way, but problems arise when a poem is relegated to an idea or, worse, when the poem is used to illuminate the criticism (or the critic) rather than the other way round. Thus, a fundamental contention of this thesis is that, above all, it is the *art* we should be seeking to understand. Anything contextual, or even extra-textual, which can help us to do so is valuable and welcome, but not at the expense of the poems.

When considering the studies of R. S. Thomas to date, one finds many very decent ones and a number of excellent ones. However, these have primarily focused on the ideas and themes of R. S. Thomas. Thus we have many essays and articles with titles like “R. S. Thomas and the Welsh Hills”, “R. S. Thomas as Priest-Poet”, “R. S. Thomas and the Hidden God”, and so on. In other words, much has been written telling us what the poetry means, but there has been very little written that illuminates *how* it means.¹⁰

⁹ Harvey Gross, *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1964) 10.

¹⁰ Some critics would rather not be confronted with how an R. S. Thomas poem creates meaning. Michael Schmidt, for example, considers Thomas’s “technical experiments [with enjambment]” to be “too self-

There are moments—a sentence here, a paragraph there—of stylistic discussion scattered throughout the criticism, and this thesis includes these moments as part of its stylistic dialogue. And, in recent years, there have been a few studies that address Thomas's style more specifically. M. Wynn Thomas, who calls attention to "the theology of Thomas's style",¹¹ Damian Walford Davies, who examines Thomas's various uses of puns,¹² and David Lloyd, who explores Thomas's formal responses to the American poet William Carlos Williams,¹³ are notable in this regard. And yet, even with these honourable exceptions, there has been nothing that attempts to account for Thomas's stylistic *development*, and there has been no extended study of any aspect of his style. As a result, this thesis is necessarily a pioneering exploration, one that seeks to begin a conversation, not conclude it. It is also of necessity a very broad investigation since R. S. Thomas published poetry for over six decades and, within that time frame, evolved dramatically as a stylist. He began as a sub-Georgian imitator, writing derivative nature lyrics in the manner of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, yet he ended his career as a radical experimentalist. This thesis chronicles R. S. Thomas's developmental journey, analyzing his various prosodies, including metrical, accentual, linear, and visual. At the same time, recalling Whitworth's observation that criticism should account for "conditions which make it possible for the text to exist", one is continually aware that for R. S. Thomas there exists an integral relationship between prosody and place. Indeed, the poet's stylistic destinations more or less coincide with geographic ones: Chirk, Hanmer, Manafon, Eglwys-fach, Aberdaron, Sarn-y-Plas.

conscious", "too laboured". He concludes: "When [Thomas] becomes self-conscious about technique, he distracts us from the poem onto *how* the poem is saying what it says" (*A Reader's Guide to Fifty Modern British Poets* [London: Heinemann, 1979] 264). A fundamental contention of this thesis, however, is that prosody, or "*how* the poem is saying what it says", is not a distraction; indeed, to be aware of, and understand, a poem's prosody is to appreciate the very foundation of its meaning.

¹¹ "Irony in the Soul: The Religious Poetry of R. S[ocrates] Thomas", *Agenda* 36.2 (1998): 49-69.

¹² "Double-entry Poetics: R. S. Thomas – Punster", *Echoes to the Amen: Essays After R. S. Thomas*, ed. Damian Walford Davies (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2003) 149-82.

¹³ "Making it New: R. S. Thomas and William Carlos Williams", *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays* 8 (2003): 121-40.

Perhaps most significantly, however, the prosodies of R. S. Thomas are a reflection of his emotional interiors. Thomas's geographic journey was accompanied by an increasingly introspective one. Indeed, the emotional interiors of R. S. Thomas are perhaps best understood not through interviews or prose writings, or even the themes and ideas that critics extract from the poetry, but through a close examination of his prosody, which often reveals what has not been, indeed *cannot* be, articulated. Rather than looking at a poem as a way of getting to know the external R. S. Thomas, this thesis prefers to get to terms with the tensions within him as they reveal themselves in the tensions—rhythmic, linguistic, structural—of the poetry itself. In this way the poems will remain, as they must, the priority. The poems, after all, are what we have.

Chapter 1: Origins of a Style (1936-1943)

The waters strive to wash away
 The frail path of her melody,
This little bird across the lake
 That links her gentle soul with me.

O wind and wave thou wilt not break,
 Uncouth and lusty as thou art,
The light thread of this golden song
 That shines so deep into my heart.¹

Hard as it may be to believe, these quatrains—with their sweet and easy rhymes, archaic diction, and unvarying iambic tetrameter—are an early, untitled composition by R. S. Thomas. Though once sent to a publisher for consideration, they were never published, and it is not hard to see why. In 1939, the year in which Thomas most likely submitted these lines (three years, it is worth noting, after the publication of Michael Roberts's *Faber Book of Modern Verse*), the dust had long since gathered on the Georgians, the last group of poets to tolerate diminutive descriptions like “frail path” and “little bird”, the very group of poets that R. S. Thomas, by his own admission, was imitating at the time.² But even if these quatrains had been penned during the decade of Edward Marsh's anthologies, they still would not, one is forced to admit, have been very impressive.³ The poem's diction—the pronoun “thou”, the adjectives “uncouth” and “lusty”, the use of poetic apostrophe (particularly with the accompanying “O”)—was outmoded by 1912, let alone 1939; adjective-verb pairings like “gentle soul” and “golden song” were long since clichés; and the predictable, but ultimately vacuous last line would have caused even

¹ The manuscript, though undated, is one of six holograph poems in the National Library of Wales, which, in style and presentation, are similar to Thomas's other work from 1939 (NLW 20006 C). Also in the NLW is a letter from R. S. Thomas to Gwyn Jones, sent in 1939, which accompanied a group of poems to be considered for publication in *Welsh Review* (Prof. Gwyn Jones Papers, NLW 41/130). R. S. Thomas's work never appeared in *Welsh Review*; however, the NLW did acquire a large amount of material from Gwyn Jones over the years (there is a substantial collection of books and manuscripts). It is possible, then, that Jones never returned Thomas's poems, and that this undated group of poems represents Thomas's 1939 submission to *Welsh Review*.

² Thomas acknowledges this imitative phase in several places. See, for example, *Autobiographies*, ed. and trans. Jason Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent, 1997) 44-45.

³ Edward Marsh edited and published five volumes of *Georgian Poetry* between 1912 and 1922.

the most open-minded critic to cringe in 1939, seventeen years after the publication of *The Waste Land*. As Thomas later became aware,

You will take seriously those first affairs
With young poems, but no attachments
Formed then but come to shame you [.]
(“To A Young Poet”, BT 11)

In truth, these 1939 quatrains represent a body of early work that the mature R. S. Thomas may have wished had never seen the light of day.⁴

But the young R. S. Thomas did not bury his quatrains. He attempted to publish them, and one is glad of it, for it would not do to begin a developmental study of his work by examining the relatively mature writing he produced in Manafon during the 1940s and 50s. Critics have often painted these poems—particularly those featuring Iago Prytherch—as the genesis of R. S. Thomas. In Manafon, critics argue, Thomas’s bourgeois, English upbringing—as well as his romantic, idealised vision of Wales—collided with the harsher lives of the Welsh hill farmers, thus creating the conflict out of which his signature poetry was born. John Powell Ward, for example, begins his book-length, chronological study of Thomas’s poetry with a chapter—“The Figure Rooted”—that covers *Song at the Year’s Turning* (1955), *Poetry for Supper* (1958), and *Tares* (1961), arguing that Thomas’s poetry begins with the “great many poems on the Welsh peasant and hill farmer”,⁵ even going so far as to call *Song at the Year’s Turning* Thomas’s “first book”.⁶ In other words, Ward effectively grounds Thomas’s beginnings in Manafon. One does not wish to be overly critical of Ward, whose pioneering treatment of Thomas’s poetry continues to retain its relevance even in the face of newer scholarship.

One simply wishes to illustrate a defect in what Damian Walford Davies terms “the

⁴ Upon reading in a newspaper that the National Library of Wales had purchased the poems, Thomas initially denied authorship, and he wrote an indignant letter to the librarian in Aberystwyth. Upon receiving details of the poems, Thomas admitted penning them. He believed that they “had most likely been kept by some editor from the early days and then sold” (Sandra Anstey, “Some Uncollected Poems and Variant Readings from the Early Work of R. S. Thomas”, *The Page’s Drift: R. S. Thomas at Eighty*, ed. M. Wynn Thomas [Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1993] 23).

⁵ John Powell Ward, *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas* (Bridgend: Seren, 2001).

⁶ *Ibid.* 30.

received narrative of Thomas's career", a narrative he rightly sees as "unconvincing".⁷ Simply put, this narrative ignores the origins of Thomas's poetry; that is, it does not begin at the beginning.⁸ While *Song at the Year's Turning* was Thomas's first volume to be published in London, and therefore his first volume to exact the attention of English critics, it was in reality his fourth published book and his third full volume of poetry.⁹ Moreover, Thomas was publishing poetry in respected journals as early as the late 1930s. Much of this very early work was derivative, and relatively immature when compared to the work written at Manafon in the 1940s, but that fact in and of itself is crucial to an understanding of the poet's evolution. In our case, it is crucial to an understanding of his evolving style. One cannot trace any poet's development—stylistic or otherwise—except by way of comparison.

By treating R. S. Thomas as a product of Manafon, then, one identifies the emergence of a distinctive and developed voice but simultaneously severs the birth of that voice from its gestation. Dilys Rowe, in her 1946 review of *The Stones of the Field* (1946), shrewdly points out how "The poetry [. . .], in these days of head-long half-clothed rushes, comes decorously into print, poised and far advanced in a poet's development".¹⁰ Of course with Thomas's career now whole (if not wholly understood), one can see that *The Stones of the Field* was far from the apex of his progression, but

⁷ Introduction. *Echoes to the Amen: Essays After R. S. Thomas*, ed. Damian Walford Davies (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2003) 4.

⁸ A related, and equally troubling, problem is that this "received narrative" of R. S. Thomas not only begins in Manafon, but also frequently ends there. As M. Wynn Thomas points out, readers "have condemned him [. . .] by continuing to identify him primarily with the Iago Prytherch of his distant Manafon period" ("Reviewing R. S. Thomas", *Books in Wales* [Summer, 1993]: 6).

⁹ Prior to *Song at the Year's Turning*, Thomas published two full volumes, *The Stones of the Field* (1946) and *An Acre of Land* (1952). He also published *The Minister* (1953), a long poem originally given as a radio broadcast and subsequently published in book form. All three were published by small local printer/publishers in Wales, in Carmarthen and Montgomeryshire; consequently, none of these volumes received much critical attention outside of Wales until they were collected in *Song at the Year's Turning* (1955), which consists of Thomas's selection of poems from these early volumes along with new work. The volume was published in London by Rupert Hart-Davis and was reviewed not only in the press but in BBC Radio's Third Programme.

¹⁰ Dilys Rowe, rev. of "The Stones of the Field", *Wales* 27.7 (1946): 229.

Rowe's point is well-taken: R. S. Thomas's style had developed a great deal by the time the volume was published.

In analyzing the development of Thomas's style, one quickly becomes aware that the style of his poems was often tied to the changing substance of his emotions. In fact, one does not need to read much R. S. Thomas to ascertain that the primary catalyst for his stylistic development was inner conflict, a sense of perpetual instability, what we might call his "disturbing muse". "Hate takes a long time / To grow in", Thomas writes in *Tares* (1961), his first post-Manafon volume, "and mine / Has increased since birth" ("Those Others" 31). The significance of these lines extends beyond a developmental context, but surely they point to an inner conflict that has been a lifetime in the making. One might argue that all poets experience this to a degree, but Thomas seems to have experienced it more acutely than most. Tony Brown and M. Wynn Thomas write of "the tensions [. . .] that hurt R. S. Thomas into verse", tensions that led him to remake himself in the image of a Welshman and a Welsh poet.¹¹ The sources of Thomas's "hurt" and his "hate" evolved and expanded over the years, taking in a number of related issues, including an insecure sense of self, an antipathy to the de-humanizing modern world of mechanisation and commercialism, and a complex relationship with an impersonal God. But these sources were always larger than Iago Prytherch, and while the hill farmer clearly provoked Thomas's inner conflict, he was not its initial cause. Indeed, it would be impossible to find a single cause of that conflict, brewing as it had been since the poet's childhood, or a single moment when it first entered his consciousness. But the point to be made here is that much of the conflict that "made" R. S. Thomas was manifestly affecting him years before he moved (one may even say fled) to Manafon, and it was also

¹¹ "The Problems of Belonging", *Welsh Writing in English*, ed. M. Wynn Thomas (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2003) 166.

affecting his style. Manafon, for its part, was R. S. Thomas's first stylistic destination, one of many the poet would arrive at, and write from, before eventually setting off again.¹²

Still, by initially focusing on the pre-Manafon years, more particularly those years Thomas spent as a curate in the English-speaking border parishes of Chirk, Denbighshire (1936-1940) and Hanmer, Flintshire (1940-1942), one certainly does not wish to understate the impact of Prytherch—the jolt he gave Thomas's sensibilities, the developments he clearly prompted in the poetry. Indeed, an analysis of the Manafon years, particularly the stylistic developments that took place therein, is the focus of the next chapter. But something happened on the road to Manafon, something that, between 1939 and 1942, knocked the Georgianism out of R. S. Thomas and simultaneously “creat[ed] a fundamental sense of insecurity and mistrust” within him.¹³ That interim, neglected though it may be, is fruitful ground. The origins of R. S. Thomas the stylist, the prosodist, in short the poet of originality, are there for the finding.

Dew on the Mushroom

When I was a child,
innocent plagiarist,
there was dew on the early-morning
mushroom, as there is not now.
(ERS 75)

Reading R. S. Thomas, one comes to realize that a shadow of lost innocence casts itself on much of his writing. The child-like (one hesitates to use the word “naïve”) trust he placed in nature and in God felt the sting of war and the accompanying drone of modernity in the 1940s, and the resulting wounds never really healed. Indeed, much of his work can be seen as a search to re-establish that lost innocence and sense of unity, a longing for that which is rural, simple, and ultimately *unselfconscious*. In the twenties and

¹² *Destinations* (Shipston-on-Stour: Celandine Press, 1985), one of Thomas's lesser-known volumes, picks up this idea of being a perpetual traveler, of arriving and setting off again.

¹³ M. Wynn Thomas, “R. S. Thomas: War Poet”, *Welsh Writing in English* 2 (1996): 85.

thirties, however, Thomas was not yet weighed down by “the new world, ugly and evil” (“No Through Road”, *SYT* 115). He was still “ignorant of the blood’s stain” (“Song for Gwydion” *AL* 9). Living in rural Wales, he eluded much of the shock of modernity of which Britain and its literary landscape felt the impact in the early part of the twentieth century. Writing of his youth and adolescence, Thomas points on several occasions to a particular experience—that of mushroom gathering—to symbolize what he saw as a purer time:

One of the most enjoyable times of the year in Holyhead was the mushroom-picking season. [. . .] those early mornings were full of magic. Have you ever touched cold mushrooms, wet with dew, smelt their freshness, and tasted them? “Frog Cheese”, the Welsh name, is apt. They have a vaguely cheesy taste [. . .] which disappears in the frying-pan, no matter how careful you are.¹⁴

From an early age, R. S. Thomas found his inspiration in the natural world and, in both poetry and prose, these dew-touched mushrooms are a microcosm of that world: fresh, ripe, and unspoiled, but also vulnerable and elusive. Such “mornings full of magic” bring to mind Hopkins’s “Goldengrove” and Dylan Thomas’s “green and golden” days. But golden groves “unleave” and, as Dylan Thomas reminds us, “the sun [. . .] is young once only”.¹⁵ In this retrospective prose passage from *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988), R. S. Thomas, shrewd with his choice of metaphor, is demonstrating that same, inevitable loss of magic. His innocence, like the mushrooms’ freshness, was to “disappear in the frying-pan” of the forties. That final phrase—“no matter how careful you are”—is significant. Thomas grew up away from industry and technology. He deliberately lived and worked in rural parishes rather than towns. But as the poet learned, there was no avoiding modernity; welcome or not, it would dry the magic from those cold mornings. And it would demand poetic expression.

¹⁴ “Y Llwybrau Gynt 2”, “The Paths Gone By” (1972), collected in *SP* 103.

¹⁵ “Spring and Fall”, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford UP, 1997) 88-9; “Fern Hill”, *Dylan Thomas: Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1957) 178.

Thomas's style began in similar innocence. Like most poets, he began by imitating what he had read, and his early reading of poetry, at school in Holyhead, was limited to F. T. Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* and the obligatory Georgian verses he studied in school. For its part, *The Golden Treasury*, first published in 1861 and periodically updated in various editions,¹⁶ was an old-fashioned anthology even by the 1920s. It is not clear which edition R. S. Thomas would have encountered in school, but from 1909-29 *The Golden Treasury*, no longer edited by Palgrave (who died in 1897), remained more or less unchanged in its various editions so that, for example, the only post-1900 poet to be included in the 1923 edition (published, one cannot help but note, a year after *The Waste Land*) was Algernon Swinburne (1837-1909), hardly a Modernist.¹⁷ Thus, while his familiarity with *The Golden Treasury* obviously gave Thomas a solid background in traditional, accentual-syllabic prosody (Shakespeare, Milton, and Keats were prominently featured in every edition), it also confined his exposure to the particular breed of poems favoured by Palgrave, who unabashedly excluded any poem that was "too long, unrhymed (or written in heroic couplets), narrative, descriptive, didactic, humorous, erotic, religious, occasional, or overly personal".¹⁸ These exclusions limited the anthology to short songs and nature lyrics that, by the time R. S. Thomas was being influenced by them, were manifestly already behind the style of the times. The full title of the anthology—*The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*—gives one a good idea of the types of poems favoured by Palgrave. Speaking of his introduction to poetry, and of his first attempts at writing it, Thomas has said:

¹⁶ *The Golden Treasury* was first published in 1861, and Palgrave edited new editions in 1862, 1878, 1884, 1891 (revised 2nd enlarged), and 1896. In 1897, Palgrave edited a "Second Series" of *The Golden Treasury* that included living poets. Oxford UP editions have appeared in 1907, 1909, 1929, 1940, 1964, and 1994. The 1994 edition, edited by John Press, includes work by R. S. Thomas.

¹⁷ Palgrave's tradition, continued for a time by his successors, was to only include work by dead poets. Because the 1923 edition of *The Golden Treasury* was the same as the 1909 edition, the last poet to be included was Swinburne, the most recently-deceased in 1909.

¹⁸ Carl Woodring and James Shapiro, eds., *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Poetry* (New York: Columbia UP, 1995) xxviii. When one considers that Thomas's mature work was, among other things, unrhymed, sometimes narrative, descriptive, humorous, erotic, religious, occasional, and personal, one sees why *The Golden Treasury* did little to expedite the development of his distinctive voice.

In the late twenties, at a time when I should have been in touch with what Eliot, Joyce, and Pound were doing, I was receiving my ideas of poetry via Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, and through such Georgian verse as was compulsory reading for my examinations in English. I was also a confirmed open-air nature lover so that such verses as I then achieved myself were almost bound to be about trees and fields and skies and seas. No bad thing if I had been familiar with the poets who knew how to deal maturely with such material, Wordsworth and Hardy for instance. But my efforts were based on the weaker poems of Shelley and the more sugary ones of the Georgians.¹⁹

Thomas mentions the late twenties but, improbable though it may seem, his work of the late thirties still reflects his outmoded influences. Not that Thomas was unwilling to update his poetry, to—as he later phrased it—“move with the times” as “life puts on speed” (“Movement” *BT* 35), but owing to a lack of stylistic models that could show him how to “deal maturely” with his love of nature, Thomas's poetry of the late 1930s, rather than moving with the style of the times, was clearly still lagging behind it.

This raises the issue of why Thomas was unaware of the Modernists in 1939. He was, in fact, aware of Eliot while at Chirk. But he was not yet ready to embrace the unfamiliar style and ideas. In a conversation with Molly Price-Owen, he says,

When I was a curate the sort of people that represented the upper middle class there—doctors and people like this, they were beginning to talk about T. S. Eliot but sort of saying “I can't make head or tail of him”, and this kind of thing and I suppose I was inclined to leave him there. It wasn't until much later that I came to appreciate his vision.²⁰

One should also point out that while he was a curate, Thomas was not in touch with literary circles, as he might have been had he been in London, and his degree was in classics, not in English. And then in Montgomeryshire in the 1940s, Thomas was attempting to distance himself from his English, middle-class background, focusing instead on the very harsh—yet also very Welsh—lives of rural farmers. Eliot may have represented exactly what he was trying to distance himself from. This is not to imply that

¹⁹ The Critical Forum: “R. S. Thomas Reads and Discusses His Own Poems”, Norwich Tapes Limited, 1978, quoted in Sandra Anstey, “Some Uncollected Poems and Variant Readings from the Early Work of R. S. Thomas”, *The Page's Drift: R. S. Thomas at Eighty* (Bridgend: Seren, 1993), 23.

²⁰ “R. S. Thomas in Conversation with Molly Price-Owen”, *David Jones Journal*, Special R. S. Thomas Issue. (Summer/Autumn 2001): 94.

Thomas intentionally ignored the work of Modernists in the 1940s, but that his attentions were simply focused elsewhere; at that time, the poet was engaging with what he saw as characteristically Welsh prosody and, as we will discuss in the next chapter, the influential work of Irish poets Austin Clarke and Patrick Kavanagh.

As we examine Thomas's work of 1939, much of which is unpublished or uncollected, we find evidence of his outdated models. One poem of note—one of the six unpublished, untitled 1939 holograph poems held in the National Library of Wales—begins as follows:

A blue snake in the valley ran
The river down from Llyn-y-Fan,
And rustled with the autumn breeze
Among the braziers of the trees.

Apart from the presence of a Welsh place name, there is nothing here that is characteristic of the mature R. S. Thomas, and the poetry is strikingly old fashioned when one considers that it was sent to an editor in 1939. In fact, reading the second couplet, one cannot help but recall Pope's mockery of clichéd technique: "Where-e'er you find *the cooling Western Breeze, / In the next Line, it whispers thro' the Trees*".²¹ And the influence of *The Golden Treasury*, particularly Shelley, is again evident in this stanza. The metre, with the exception of one incidental substitution in the first line, is a singing, iambic-tetrameter, the quatrain consisting of two exact-rhyme couplets. The adjectives dutifully fill out the syllable count, and every attempt at emotional colouring relies on nature—a running, rustling river; a rustling breeze in blazing trees—so that everything is external, resting comfortably on the surface; that is, there is nothing internal or introspective about the poem. Here is a similar passage from Shelley, collected in *The Golden Treasury*:

The sun is warm, the sky is clear,
The waves are dancing fast and bright,

²¹ From "An Essay On Criticism", lines 350-51.

Blue isles and snowy mountains wear
The purple noon's transparent might.²²

While the rhyme scheme here is slightly different, the tone, the easy rhymes, the “transparent”, surface-level nature description, the filled-in metre that strictly adheres to a syllable count, even the smooth enjambment between the third and fourth line forms the mould from which the Thomas quatrain is cast.²³ However, the next stanza of Thomas's poem, equally unremarkable in its own right, nonetheless proves interesting in the context of this chapter:

The hills reached up and sometimes drew
The clouds' attention as they flew,
And mushroom plentiful the sheep
Grazed on the hillsides green and steep.

The iambic tetrameter is constant (the exception being a routine trochaic substitution in the first foot of the fourth line), and the chiming rhymes are predictable. But the rhymes are also appropriate to the poem's specific worldview. In “Words and the Poet” (1964), Thomas suggests that exact rhyme is “the sign of an ordered world of pattern into which things fall as inevitably and satisfactorily as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle” (*SP* 53-4). While the style of Thomas's poems in the 1940s and beyond reflects a world where things do *not* fall in line, where life's “jigsaw puzzle” cannot be neatly assembled, this poem reflects a world that is relatively stable and unthreatened (the poem may have been written prior to 1939, but Thomas still felt comfortable enough with it that year to send it to an editor). In fact, as we look at this stanza, we can't help but notice, in Thomas's description of the sheep, the recurring symbol of that ordered world: the “mushroom plentiful” flocks perched on a green, idyllic hillside.

²² P. B. Shelley, “Stanzas Written in Dejection Near Naples”, *The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*, ed. Francis Turner Palgrave (London: Oxford UP, 1923) 227.

²³ Of course the image of a “purple noon” reminds one of W. B. Yeats's much later poem, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”, from *The Rose* (1893): “The midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow”. Yeats's early poetry, *The Rose* in particular, strongly influenced Thomas's poetry during this time period, as we will see.

And yet Thomas's poem, for all its formal stability, is not entirely without discord. The third and final stanza abruptly and unexpectedly changes the tone.

But one came by and frowned to see
How colourful the world would be;
With horny hand he rubbed away
My frail attempt to paint the day.

One does not wish to make too much of this stanza, coming as it does almost as an afterthought. One could argue for a connection between a mysterious, rough hand that appears to wipe out a potentially-ideal world, and an enigmatic God who, in much later poems, intentionally seeds the world He creates with discord, germs, and even brutality. But this comparison would be tenuous, especially when considering Thomas's other 1939 poems. A better connection, considering the relationship Thomas is making between poetry and landscape painting, might be made with his poems from the fifties and sixties about Wales and Welsh landscapes, which often juxtapose "the golden landscape / of nature, with the twisted creatures / Crossing it" ("The Observer" *NBF* 11), and which reveal Thomas abandoning "a watercolour's appeal / To the mass" in favour of "the poem's / Harsher conditions" ("Reservoirs" *NBF* 26). But what is perhaps most significant about the element of discord in this poem is simply that it is present. Thomas's poems of the late 1930s, while largely based on earlier stylistic models, *do* begin to reflect a hint of uneasiness, an awareness that that the world is more than little birds and dew-misted mushrooms, and we should not ignore this awareness. Its impact on Thomas's style, although slight at first, would grow exponentially over the course of the next few years.

In his prose autobiography, *Neb* (which is written in the third person), R. S. Thomas writes of his years in Chirk, "It was here, for the first time, that he came face to face with the problem of pain" (*A* 43). Although docile in comparison to the chaotic poems that followed hard upon them, Thomas's poems of the late 1930s begin to reflect

his awareness of pain and an accompanying personal uneasiness. In another of the 1939 holograph poems, also untitled, this awareness finds expression as “the pale faces of / The poor, the weary, the outcast”, and the poem contrasts the “smooth grace” of nature’s “slow water” with the “dark waters” of the city, which “may be / the ultimate deception” to those who hear their “seductive” song. Here, rather than functioning merely as the subject matter for innocent songs, nature now has the potential to be internalized and used metaphorically, and to disturb. Again, this is, it would seem, an expression of Thomas’s newfound awareness of pain and his own growing uneasiness. Tony Brown points out how “in part, this [unease] was to be expected: a young man, fresh from theological college and in an unfamiliar area, confronting for the first time the emotional and spiritual demands of ministering to ordinary parishioners”, but Brown also points to other factors—including Thomas’s pacifism in the face of impending war (and his disillusionment that the Church in Wales would not condemn militarism) and a growing discontent with international capitalism (an attitude partially influenced by his reading of Hewlett Johnson, the “Red Dean” of Canterbury)—as being partially responsible for Thomas’s unease. “Such conflicts in belief”, writes Brown, “must have caused the young curate to reflect deeply on the values of the Church in which he had just begun to serve and on the nature of his role within it”, and the resulting unease “ultimately amounted to what might, in existentialist terms, be defined as a sense of inauthenticity, the sense [. . .] of not being in secure possession of one’s own identity”.²⁴ Barbara Prys-Williams is more blunt as she describes Thomas’s “weak and fitful sense of his own selfhood” and “his inability to have any clear sense of who he is”.²⁵

With these ideas of identity, unease, and personal reflection in mind, it is worth examining “Cyclamen”, another of Thomas’s 1939 poems. Like the holograph poems we

²⁴ R. S. Thomas. *Writers of Wales* (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2006) 5-6.

²⁵ “Buried to Be Dug Up: R. S. Thomas (1913-2000)”, *Twentieth Century Autobiography* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004) 122.

have been discussing, “Cyclamen” was sent to an editor for consideration, but unlike those poems, “Cyclamen” was accepted, by Seamus O’Sullivan, editor of *The Dublin Magazine*, whom Thomas had visited in Ireland the previous year. The poem was later collected in *The Stones of the Field*.

They are white moths
With wings
Lifted
Over a dark water
In act to fly,
Yet stayed
By their frail images
In its mahogany depths.
(SF 11)

At first glance, this is little more than an imagist poem that relies on a central metaphor, what amounts to, in Anstey’s words, “a cyclamen described as a white moth that is restrained from flying by its awareness of its own image in the water below”.²⁶ But upon closer reading, the poem becomes decidedly more than this. It says much more, in fact, about the speaker than it does about its subject, for the speaker not only sees the cyclamen as moths but also personifies them, gives them emotion. One notes that the cyclamen/moths are “stayed” by the “frail images” staring back at them from the “depths” of the “dark water” (one recalls the “dark waters” from the earlier, untitled holograph poem). It can be argued, then, that each flower is frozen not merely by “its awareness of its own image”, but also by a realization of its own frailty. Again, it is the speaker, the implied observer who is experiencing this emotion, not the flowers themselves. Perhaps, knowing what we do of R. S. Thomas’s uneasiness during this time, it is not such a bold leap to suggest the poem reflects (quite literally) his own introspection. Brown points out how at Chirk, “it seems likely [. . .] Thomas was confronting [. . .] the choice of life he had made: how real had been that choice, and thus how authentic was his present life?” And he also points out how “the resort to the mirror

²⁶ Anstey, “Uncollected Poems and Variant Readings” 25.

for reassurance of identity at a time of self-alienation and self-questioning is a motif that is revealingly recurrent throughout Thomas's work".²⁷ "Certainly it has come to me many times with a catch in the breath that I don't know who I am", Thomas later wrote.²⁸ Perhaps it is overly ambitious to inject these cyclamen with all the uneasiness and inauthenticity Thomas began to experience at Chirk, but the correlation between the growth of his "disturbing muse" and the introduction of that disturbance into the poems seems an important one.

In terms of the style of "Cyclamen", one first notices that, unlike most of Thomas's early work, it is written in free verse. It consists of one sentence, whose parts are broken into smaller breath units, many of which are prepositional phrases. The prosody of "Cyclamen" is linear, rather than metrical; that is, the poem's movement is dictated almost exclusively by line breaks, not by a metrical pattern. These very short lines reinforce the idea of frailty; as soon as the reader encounters each single, tentative "snapshot" of the scene, the image is replaced by another by means of a line break. This happens, of course, within a poem that is itself a single moment, a single image. This kind of linear prosody is a rare exception within the body of Thomas's early work, but Thomas increasingly turns to linear, rather than metrical, prosody in his later work, that of the late 1950s and beyond.²⁹ It therefore seems worth noting that when ideas of frailty and instability begin to enter Thomas's work, he also begins to look for formal structures that reflect those feelings. Such formal instability, and the breakdown of the stanzaic structure, were to become features of his poetry written after the outbreak of war. Indeed, while Thomas's personal uneasiness did not, in and of itself, cause him to reject

²⁷ Brown, R. S. *Thomas* 7. The image of the mirror is also frequently associated, in the later work, with the myth of Narcissus, an association which, as Katie Gramich observes, Thomas uses "to flesh out his own personal demons". See "Mirror Games: Self and M(O)ther in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas. *Echoes to the Amen* 132.

²⁸ R. S. Thomas, "Autobiographical Essay", *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R.S. Thomas*, ed. William V. Davis (Fayetteville: U. of Arkansas P., 1993) 20.

²⁹ The lines of "Cyclamen" differ from Thomas's later free verse in that they are mainly broken between syntactical units, whereas his later free verse is consistently broken *against* syntax.

his Georgian models, the further instability caused by World War II certainly did, as we will see.

Before moving on, however, to the impact of war on R. S. Thomas's style, we need to consider what it was that the poet responded to in these early Georgian models. It was the poetic material, the subject matter, of Georgianism—its bucolic imagery and measured lyricism—that charmed R. S. Thomas. There is no single Georgian poet that stands out as having expressly affected his style more than the others (unless one considers Edward Thomas as unambiguously Georgian, and R. S. Thomas always set him apart from his Georgian contemporaries).³⁰ Indeed, when Thomas, many years later, refers to their influence on his early work, he almost always speaks of the Georgians collectively, painting them as models of sentimentality and general pleasantness. What he seems to have responded to—and gleaned—from Lascelles Abercrombie, Gordon Bottomley, W. H. Davies, Walter de la Mare, Harold Monro, and others in the Edward Marsh circle was a light, one-dimensional diction grounded in flowers, fields, trees, and birds. There are certainly more meritorious aspects of Georgianism. The Georgians, for example, pre-date the Imagists in their attempts to tear down late-Victorian poetic registers and intellectualism, and they deserve more credit for initiating poetic realism than they have generally been given. The Georgians also, on occasion, attempt to deal with urban street scenes, and at times the soldier-poets (notably Rupert Brooke) reflect the psychological impact of World War I. But, in looking back, R. S. Thomas scarcely mentions Georgianism's estimable qualities; instead, it was the lyrical sweetness of Georgian poetry that appealed to him, an example of which is the poem "Wanderers", by Walter de la Mare:

Wide are the meadows of night,
And daisies are shining there,
Tossing their lovely dew,

³⁰ "What had we been taught in school? The Georgians mainly, but hardly Edward Thomas". "Autobiographical Essay" 6.

Lustrous and fair;
 And through these sweet fields go,
 Wanderers amid the stars—
 Venus, Mercury, Uranus, Neptune,
 Saturn, Jupiter, Mars.

Tired in their silver, they move,
 And circling, whisper and say,
 Fair are the blossoming meads of delight
 Through which we stray.³¹

These “meadows of night”, “sweet fields”, “blossoming meads of delight”, and dew-covered daisies (not dissimilar to dew-covered mushrooms, perhaps) are exactly the kind of pleasant nature descriptions that R. S. Thomas imbibed from the Georgians and imitated in his early work. Here is another of the 1939 holograph poems, also untitled:

Like slender waterweeds to my mind
 The poplars wave in the great wind,
 And shoals of fishes are the leaves
 Which the smooth, rain-blurred air receives
 Within the silken stream.

The grottoed hills are chased and kissed
 By the low sky and the swirling mist,
 And under a bridge of amethyst
 Pale water lilies gleam.

Thomas’s images—slender waterweeds, waving poplars, a silken stream, a swirling mist that kisses the hills—are akin to de la Mare’s sweet fields, shining daisies, lovely dews, and blossoming meads of delight.³² Both poems embody the kind of stereotypical Georgian verses that John Press describes as “vapid musings about the English countryside”.³³ The metres of the poems differ, but their registers are remarkably similar. Both achieve a lyrical, relaxed tone through internal assonance and the frequent combinations of the consonants “w”, “m”, and “s”. De la Mare’s lines “Wide are the meadows of night” and “Wanderers amid the stars” are echoed by Thomas’s “Like slender waterweeds to my

³¹ *Georgian Poetry 1913-1915*, ed. Edward Marsh (London: The Poetry Bookshop, 1915) 78.

³² One also finds similar images in de la Mare’s prose, including a reference to “slender water-weeds”: “It came sweeping [. . .] full with the early autumnal rains [. . .] and tumbled headlong into a great pool, nodding with tall, *slender water-weeds*” (*The Return*. [Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger, 2004] 83, italics added).

³³ *A Map of Modern English Verse* (London: Oxford UP, 1969) 107.

mind” and “Within the silken stream”. The consonants slide smoothly from the mouth, and repeated vowels tie words together: *wide, night; wanderers, stars; within, silken*. In fact, the most notable difference between the two poems is that Thomas’s was written approximately two decades later than de la Mare’s, long after such verse had become outdated. Significantly, Thomas tells Molly Price-Owen, “Edward Thomas, possibly a bit of Walter de la Mare, that was the measure of my early attempts at writing poetry”.³⁴

Thomas speaks of his early attraction to nature poetry in his introduction to *The Batsford Book of Country Verse* (1961), an anthology, it is worth mentioning, that includes de la Mare, as well as many authors from *The Golden Treasury*:

This anthology is mainly for young people. Perhaps it is a pity, then, that it is a selfish one; for in it I have included many of the pieces which I knew and loved as a boy, some of which I had by heart. [. . .] it was by way of nature that I myself came to poetry. [. . .] Most young poets’ first attempts at verse have been based on some description of the natural world. But such times are passing, if they have not already passed. The environment of the majority of our population today is that of science, technology and industry. [. . .] We know that the most important thing in life is, as Van Gogh said, to find something to love. And perhaps one of the wisest ways of setting about this is to begin with the near and familiar. It is in learning to love and cherish our own little tree, or field or brook that we become fitted for wider and deeper affections.³⁵

One is aware of just how Georgian that last sentence sounds: “cherish our own little tree, or field or brook”. The diminutive, especially in reference to the natural world, is a characteristic of Georgian poetry, and the adjective “little” reminds one of Thomas’s 1939 quatrains and that “little bird across the lake”. We also sense the aforementioned idea of lost innocence in the reflective (one may even say wistful) line, “Such times are passing, if they have not already passed”, and reading the *Batsford* introduction, where Thomas is reflecting on his own boyhood, one again senses why it was the simple Georgian nature lyrics, rather than Georgianism’s attempts to break away from Victorian poetic practice, that appealed to him when he began to write poetry: Thomas presumably

³⁴ “R. S. Thomas in Conversation with Molly Price-Owen” 94.

³⁵ *The Batsford Book of Country Verse*, ed. R. S. Thomas (London: B. T. Batsford, 1961) 7-8.

saw in them the poetic expression of his own fondness for “the near and familiar”. These poets had found “something to love” in nature. But we also see in this passage Thomas’s retrospective awareness of how nature prepared him “for wider and deeper affections”, and this is an important point: although the *way* Thomas uses nature in his poetry changes as an integral part of his developing style and maturation as a writer, the natural world retains its key role in his poetry. This is true not only of Thomas’s well-known, mud-besmirched confrontations with Prytherch, but also of his socio-political poems, his inner pilgrimages of identity, and his spiritual reachings across the God-space. Long after what he above calls “the environment [. . .] of science, technology, and industry” splintered Thomas’s innocence in the 1940s and 50s, he nonetheless remained a poet who found inspiration and poetic material in the natural world.

As we have already established, Thomas’s sub-Georgian poetry was primarily written during his years at Chirk, before the onset of World War II. He spoke of this period in a BBC radio broadcast near the end of his life:

I’ve always been an open-air person, and although I began my curacy in a mining area on the Welsh border, fortunately it was quite close to the hills above Llangollen. And I used to wander, and that was the time when I was discovering Edward Thomas, who wrote about Wiltshire and Hampshire and areas quite different from above Llangollen. I began to concentrate on the smaller life around me—the trees in the parsonage garden, which used to fill up with warblers on passage in September—and this interest in birds never deserted me.³⁶

Here, one again notes the poet’s focus on “smaller life” (birds in particular) and the general pleasantries of nature. But, significantly, one also notes how those pleasantries are associated with Edward Thomas, whom R. S. was discovering at the same time, and this is not something to be glossed over. Indeed, considering the frequency with which R. S. Thomas mentions Edward Thomas as an important early influence, it is remarkable that critics, though presumably aware of the connection, have yet to explore its relevance

³⁶ “With Great Pleasure”, presented by R. S. Thomas. Reader: Ronald Pickup. BBC Radio 4. 2000.

in any detail. W. J. Keith comes closest to indicating the significance of that connection, writing, “I strongly suspect [. . .] Edward Thomas gave the younger poet a clue towards the evolution of his own inimitable and wholly characteristic poetic style”.³⁷ And so he did, though R. S. Thomas’s stylistic responses to Edward Thomas did not reach fruition until the 1950s and 60s. Still, we should note that in the late 1930s, at a time when R. S. Thomas was already beginning to experience feelings of inauthenticity and unease, he was also beginning to feel a connection with Edward Thomas, a poet to whom he would later return and in whose work he would eventually find a style that could express those feelings.

And yet, it is entirely possible that a much simpler matter first endeared Edward Thomas to R. S. Thomas: a shared love of birds. That connection—between his discovery of Edward Thomas and his lifelong interest in birds—is made by R. S. Thomas in the above passage. Indeed, in the radio broadcast from which the passage is taken, which features R. S. Thomas reading some of his favourite poems, he selects Edward Thomas’s “The Unknown Bird” as a personal favourite.³⁸ In that poem, the speaker hears, but does not see, an enigmatic bird (“No one saw him: I alone could hear / though many listened [. . .] / He never came again”),³⁹ and he is haunted by its song evermore. The birds of R. S. Thomas’s poetry—arguably his most frequently-used symbols—are, as John Davies has written, similarly enigmatic, “ultimately elusive, passing through [. . .] mysteriously”.⁴⁰ And one cannot escape the supposition, especially given R. S. Thomas’s statements about the impact of Edward Thomas, that it was from Edward Thomas that the young R. S. Thomas first gleaned the symbolic possibilities of

³⁷ *The Poetry of Nature: Rural Perspectives in Poetry from Wordsworth to the Present* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980) 187.

³⁸ R. S. Thomas also quotes “The Unknown Bird” in his introduction to his selection of Edward Thomas’s poems, citing it as an example of “The Celtic Imagination”. See *Selected Poems of Edward Thomas*, ed. R. S. Thomas (London: Faber, 1964) 11.

³⁹ *Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems*, ed. Edna Longley (Glasgow: MacDonald and Evans, 1978) 43.

⁴⁰ John Davies, “‘Only the Mind to Fly With’: Birds in R. S. Thomas’s Poetry”, *Poetry Wales* 30.3 (Jan. 1995): 22.

birds. One striking example of this is apparent in one of R. S. Thomas's most anthologized early poems, "Cynddylan on a Tractor" (*AL* 16). In the poem, Cynddylan roars by on his new machine, "emptying the wood / Of foxes and squirrels and bright jays". The poem concludes with these lines:

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

One does not wish, at this point, to address the socio-political implications of Cynddylan being like a "knight at arms", or to explicate the poem's style in any degree of detail. R. S. Thomas's full response to Edward Thomas, stylistically, comes later and will be dealt with in due course. For now, one simply wishes to point out the remarkable resemblance to lines by Edward Thomas, from his poem, "Good-Night":

I can hear no more those suburb nightingales;
Thrushes and blackbirds sing in the gardens of the town
In vain: the noise of man, beast, and machine prevails.⁴¹

Whether or not R. S. Thomas *consciously* took the phrasing of birds singing "in vain", or the theme of their songs being drowned out by noise from a machine, from Edward Thomas, is impossible to say. While R. S. Thomas probably internalized these and other elements on some level while a curate at Chirk, his deeper reactions to Edward Thomas, as mentioned above, did not significantly alter his style at the time. While the young R. S. Thomas *did*, by his own admission, consciously try to imitate Edward Thomas—

In 1938 [. . .] under the influence of the beautiful and exciting country to the west he continued to write poetry—tender, innocent lyrics in the manner of the Georgian poets, because that was his background to his reading among the poets. Edward Thomas was one of his favourites and because the latter had written about the countryside, the budding poet tried to imitate him. (*A* 44-5)

—these imitations were probably more like the "tender, innocent lyrics" we have been discussing. Indeed, while singling out Edward Thomas as an early "favourite" in the above excerpt, R. S. Thomas still groups him with the Georgians and admires him merely

⁴¹ *Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems* 57.

“because [he] had written about the countryside”. And as he tells Molly Price-Owen, “Edward Thomas obviously as a writer about the countryside inspired me very much. I suppose a lot of my earlier attempts were really trying to describe the country in his terms”.⁴² But Edward Thomas—more generally introverted than his Georgian contemporaries, more genuinely seeing the world as “strange” at times, and certainly more concerned with issues of identity—would eventually offer R. S. Thomas much more than nature lyrics.⁴³ He would become a kindred spirit, a fellow stranger. As will become apparent, R. S. Thomas would eventually return to Edward Thomas as an example of the estranged, of a voice that shared a similar yearning, and in so doing, he would imbibe much of the latter’s style as well. Lines like “and in the birdless streets, / where the fan’s heart mechanically beats, / No song falls, soothing, personal, sweet” (“Rhondda” *AL* 24) may not have been intentionally modeled on lines from Edward Thomas, but they are surely responses to lines like those quoted above, from “Good-Night”, as are the following lines:

He cannot read the flower-printed book
Of nature, nor distinguish the small songs
The birds bring him, calling with wide bills
Out of the leaves and over the bare hills;
("Enigma" *AL* 31)

In fact, even though *An Acre of Land* (1952)—the volume in which “Cynddyllan on a Tractor”, “Rhondda”, and “Enigma” are all found—takes its title from Siôn Tudur, a sixteenth century poet, one might argue that the title is also derived (again, perhaps unconsciously) from Edward Thomas:

An acre of land between the shore and the hills,
Upon a ledge that shows my kingdoms three,

⁴² "R. S. Thomas in Conversation with Molly Price-Owen" 93.

⁴³ Even if he did not respond to them initially, R. S. Thomas clearly came to value these introspective elements. In his introduction to his selection of Edward Thomas, he points to the poet's "self-searching honesty", and writes, "This poet was primarily a personal one. He was interested in giving expression to the loves and doubts and fears that possessed him" (*Selected Poems of Edward Thomas* 12-13).

The lovely visible earth and sky and sea
Where what the curlew needs not, the farmer tills:⁴⁴

All of these images—land, shore, hills, earth, sky, sea, birds, a tilling farmer—represent the poetic material of *An Acre of Land*.

Although Edward Thomas's "Good-Night" resolves positively, with the speaker, in the face of nothing but "strangers' eyes", still finding solace in a "traveller's goodnight", he nevertheless remains a stranger in the town, a traveller, an outsider there, and it is this idea that most closely connects the two Thomases: that of being perpetually homeless, of being estranged. Tony Brown writes of

R.S. Thomas's relation to the life in which he has found himself:
detached, looking on, or looking in from outside, aware of himself as an
outsider, deracinated, and seeking some sense of involvement in a way of
life which would give him a sense of belonging [. . .] a sense of home,⁴⁵

and with this idea in mind, another line from "Good-Night" takes on an interesting resonance: "The friendless town is friendly; homeless, I am not lost". One cannot help but notice the similarity, in both rhythm and register, to the last lines of "Out of the Hills", the first poem of *The Stones of the Field*: "Be then his fingerpost / Homeward. The earth is patient; he is not lost". Apart from the similarities of tone, register, even a semicolon preceding the last declaration of each poem, the *idea* of "home" and its relationship to being "lost" is extremely important to both poets. Indeed, R. S. Thomas's line break emphasizes that idea: "Be then his fingerpost / *Homeward*".⁴⁶ Each deals with that relationship differently, however. For Edward Thomas, "home" is an internal feeling that is not place-specific. For R. S. Thomas, "home" is likewise an internal, even an imagined, ideal, but it is *always* tied to place, as it is in "Out of the Hills". Where the speaker of "Good-Night" can find "home" in a friendless town, the farmer in "Out of the Hills" is actually "undone" in the town, and he only finds his "home" when he

⁴⁴ From "For These", *Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems* 94.

⁴⁵ Brown, *R. S. Thomas* 4-5.

⁴⁶ This technique—using lineation to draw emphasis to key words—is one of the most important features of R. S. Thomas's free verse, as we will examine at length in subsequent chapters.

returns to the hills. “Out of the Hills” is itself a poem written from the point of view of an outsider, a poem that, as M. Wynn Thomas has observed, actually gains its authenticity from the fact that it is written from a “foreign” perspective.⁴⁷ This is R. S. Thomas’s opening statement, as it were, the first poem of his first book, and it places him outside of his Welsh surroundings, as “other”, as homeless. It thus places him, once again, in the company of Edward Thomas.

Even though, as mentioned above, R. S. Thomas’s full stylistic response to Edward Thomas does not occur in the late 1930s (the above examples are all from the Manafon period, and it is not until he reaches Eglwys-fach that R. S. Thomas’s stylistic response to Edward Thomas is fully realized), there are two reasons for discussing Edward Thomas in the context of Thomas’s stylistic origins. The first and most obvious reason is a chronological one, namely that it was during these formative years that R. S. Thomas was discovering Edward Thomas, and for the first time internalizing his work. The second (and more important) reason is that R. S. Thomas, whose own life was about to be uprooted by conflict, would look to Edward Thomas for a style of poetry that could bridge the gap between an over-simple lyricism and a more authentic, conflict-driven expressiveness. Years later, R. S. Thomas would write:

During the period of [Edward Thomas’s] formation as a poet, most contemporary verse was what we should call Georgian in tone. This was prior to the great upheaval of the First World War. Much of the poets’ subject matter was taken from the world of the country-side, where the motor had hardly intruded. From one point of view, this atmosphere was congenial to Thomas. It left his world of lanes and downs and country folk undisturbed. But this is to ignore the approaching change in the whole fabric of English life. The attitude of the last two centuries to poetry was about to be proved inadequate to the new situation. The easy, glib rhythms, the complacent sweetness, the eloquent phrasing—all these were rejected and held up to obloquy.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ M. Wynn Thomas, “For Wales See Landscape: Early R. S. Thomas and the English Topographical Tradition”, *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays* 9 (2004-05): 33.

⁴⁸ *Selected Poems of Edward Thomas*, 12.

Thomas is aware of how Edward Thomas's poetry bridged the gap between Georgianism and a modern consciousness, acting as what Edna Longley calls "a *via media* between 'old fashioned pomp and sweetness' and the 'discord and fuss' of [. . .] experimenters".⁴⁹ But this passage also says as much about R. S. Thomas as it does about Edward Thomas. Change "First World War" to "Second World War", and this passage could almost be autobiographical (of course during R. S. Thomas's "formation as a poet", the "contemporary verse" of the day was not "Georgian in tone" but, as we have been discussing, the verse he was reading at the time certainly was). When R. S. Thomas writes that "[Edward Thomas's] new prose rhythms and plain language offered a breakthrough from the dead end of Georgian verse",⁵⁰ he is certainly writing about what Edward Thomas's style did for English-language poetry as a whole. But he is also revealing what Edward Thomas's style did for him personally. On one hand, Edward Thomas became a "fingerpost homeward" for R. S. Thomas ("Out of the Hills" *SF* 7), if "home" is understood to be an idea rather than an actual place. On the other, he was a stylistic model, one that, in R. S. Thomas's own words, offered "a salutary corrective of florid or banal writing" in the face of both external and internal conflict.

But Edward Thomas was not the only writer to affect R. S. Thomas during his years at Chirk. Filled as he was with the magic of nature in the 1930s, it is no wonder that he also found his way to the early poetry of W. B. Yeats and the prose works of Fiona Macleod (William Sharp). These authors, in Thomas's own words, "came to represent exactly the life that he would love to live among the peat and the heather on the west coast" (*A* 45). They also—and this is a crucial point—led Thomas to associate the purity he found in nature with what he saw as a Celtic way of life, "a simple peasant culture where identity, both communal and individual, was unproblematic, growing from a rich

⁴⁹ *Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems* 11.

⁵⁰ *Selected Poems of Edward Thomas* 13.

imaginative heritage, rooted in a particular place”.⁵¹ This is not a difficult jump to make, to see how an R. S. Thomas in the grip of Shelley and the Georgians soon “dreamed of breaking away and [. . .] living in a cottage on water and crust”,⁵² and to see why he would then have been attracted to the wattle-house of Innisfree, to the “Song of the Happy Shepherd”, and to King Fergus on his Celtic shores. And it is easy to see how Macleod’s descriptions of brittle, stone cottages, wet peat fields, and wind-swept Scottish moors would have thrilled the young curate (Thomas uses the term “lost my head completely”).⁵³ He certainly would have been attracted to words like these:

I would say that I do not seek merely to reproduce ancient Celtic presentments of tragic beauty and tragic fate, but do seek in nature and in life, and in the swimming thought of timeless imagination, for the kind of beauty that the old Celtic poets discovered and uttered. There were poets and mythmakers in those days; and today we may be sure that a new Mythos is being woven, though we may no longer regard with the old wonder, or in the old wonder imaginatively shape and colour the forces of Nature and her silent and secret processes; for the mythopoeic faculty is not only a primitive instinct but a spiritual need.⁵⁴

One readily associates phrases like “timeless imagination”, “imaginatively shape and colour the forces of nature”, and “spiritual need” with Thomas’s poetry, even his late poetry.⁵⁵ And Thomas was, at the time he was discovering Yeats and Macleod, beginning to “seek in nature [. . .] for the kind of beauty that the old Celtic poets discovered and uttered”. In Yeats and MacLeod, then, Thomas found writers who could articulate his romantic impulses. And because those articulations were grounded in Celtic lands, they resonated with R. S. Thomas’s growing attraction to what was becoming his vision of a Celtic Wales: simple, rural, rooted in the living traditions of the past.

⁵¹ Brown, R. S. *Thomas* 10.

⁵² “Autobiographical Essay” 6.

⁵³ “Autobiographical Essay” 6.

⁵⁴ Macleod, Fiona (William Sharp), “Celtic”, *The Winged Destiny – Studies in the Spiritual History of the Gael* (London: Heinemann, 1910) 184.

⁵⁵ Even with his Romantic worldview deflated, Thomas still subscribes to Romantic notions of imagination as set forth by Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, and especially Coleridge. See the present writer’s “A God of Grass and Pen: R. S. Thomas and the Romantic Imagination”, *North American Journal of Welsh Studies* 3.2 (2003): 18-38.

The seeds of R. S. Thomas's imaginative vision of Wales seem to have been planted when he was a boy. One of his earliest memories, as told in his autobiography, is of standing on a Liverpool beach with his father during World War I:

How does memory work? It keeps hold of some things, while letting other things go into oblivion. It is one thing that remains. One day on the beach at Hoylake his father directed his attention to a row of mountains far away over the sea to the west. 'That's Wales,' he said, in English.
(A 28)

As M. Wynn Thomas points out, the above passage "emblemizes what might lightly be characterized as [Thomas's] Liverpool complex: his lifelong sense of being internally exiled from his own country and its ancient aboriginal culture. It conveys his lifelong frustrated yearning to return 'home' from that exile".⁵⁶ This desire for "home", and its relationship to being an "exile", is something we have already discussed to a degree in the context of R. S. Thomas's attraction to the work of Edward Thomas. But the above passage is also the beginning of R. S. Thomas's looking at the majesty of Wales from a distance, of seeing it as something looming and distant, something "ancient" and "aboriginal". Thomas would come to associate that ancientness with his aforementioned fondness for primitive nature, and he would come to see it as something decidedly Celtic, as part of what he called "the true Wales of [his] imagination" (A 10). It was, one recalls, this fondness for nature that led Thomas to venture on walks into the Llangollen hills while he was Curate at Chirk.⁵⁷ But his attraction to a Celtic way of life also led Thomas beyond the Llangollen hills.

⁵⁶ "For Wales See Landscape" 21.

⁵⁷ As we have already discussed, Thomas associated his walks above Llangollen with his discovery of Edward Thomas. It is no wonder, then, that Thomas also began to associate Edward Thomas with this Celtic way of life. Indeed, in his introduction to his Faber selection of Edward Thomas's poems, R. S. Thomas attempts to re-make Edward Thomas in the image of a Welsh poet, one possessed with "Celtic imagination", who was "fascinated" by "lines such as Llywarch Hen's 'Yn Aber Cuawc yt ganant gogeu' – 'at Aber Cuawc the cuckoos sing'", and whose imaginative relationship to nature potentially had a "Welsh source" (*Selected Poems of Edward Thomas* 11). Edward Thomas's Welsh connections notwithstanding—his parents were Welsh—R. S. Thomas's depiction of him as a Welsh poet ultimately reveals more about R. S. Thomas than Edward Thomas.

In 1937, R. S. Thomas visited the Scottish highlands with his fiancée, the artist Mildred Eldridge, in search of the romantic peat fields and moors he had found described in the work of Fiona Macleod. But Thomas was disappointed on this trip, unable to find the Celtic Eden he was in search of: “He had been completely disillusioned. He did not get one glimpse of Fiona Macleod’s magical land” (A 47). Still, “the dreams did not cease to be” (A 47), and he made a visit to Ireland the following year, where he visited Seamus O’Sullivan, editor of *The Dublin Magazine*. Then he continued west to Galway where, for the first time, he found some of the Celtic magic he had been seeking. In Thomas’s words, “This was the country of which Yeats had sung, a land of common folk, their language Irish and their ways traditionally Celtic” (A 47-8).

And indeed it was Yeats’s poetry, not Macleod’s prose, that triggered a stylistic response in R. S. Thomas. As Brown has observed, critics often point to W. B. Yeats (invariably in a list with Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot) as a poet who intrigued and influenced R. S. Thomas, but the nature of that influence has yet to be examined in any detail.⁵⁸ While this chapter will not fully rectify that problem, one wishes to show how Thomas’s stylistic response to Yeats stems from his attraction to Yeats’s depiction of a Celtic Ireland, the very Ireland Thomas found on his 1938 trip. In fact it is not surprising, given the poet’s emotional response to that trip, that it was to Seamus O’Sullivan that he sent “The Bat”, an early lyric that, despite its short length and seeming simplicity, is actually one of Thomas’s more stylistically Yeatsian poems. Although published in the same issue of *The Dublin Magazine* as “Cyclamen”, “The Bat” was not collected in *The Stones of the Field* with the latter poem:

The day is done, the swallow moon
 Skims the pale waters of the sky,
 And under the blossom of sunset cloud
 Is hidden from the eye.

⁵⁸ “Blessings, Stevens”: R. S. Thomas and Wallace Stevens”, *Echoes to the Amen*: 112-13.

And now when every spectral hour
 Is mindful of the ancient wars
 A withered leaf comes fluttering forth
 To hunt the insect stars.⁵⁹

Like “Cyclamen”, this poem works around a central metaphor. Whereas in the previous poem, the cyclamen were described as moths, in this poem a bat is described as “a withered leaf”. Or perhaps the opposite is true, and it is the leaf blowing into starlight that is being described as a bat emerging for a hunt (the poem’s personification is symmetrical if read in this way; that is, the moon in the first stanza is a swallow skimming, and the leaf in the second stanza is a bat hunting). But the poem’s ambiguity aside, it is its style that brings Yeats to mind. The ballad stanzas—with their alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines and their *abcb* rhyme schemes—are frequently used in Yeats’s early ballads, such as “The Ballad of Moll Magee” and “The Ballad of Father Gilligan”. The use of the uncommon adjective “spectral” reminds one of “Ego Dominus Tuus”: “and is that spectral image / The man that Lapo and Guido knew?”⁶⁰ And an old, “withered leaf” that “flutters forth” perhaps brings to mind the refrain line of “The Madness of King Goll”: “*They will not hush, the leaves a-flutter round me, the beech leaves old*”.⁶¹ Both the register and imagery of “The Bat” recall several poems in Yeats’s *The Rose* (1893), and Thomas’s attraction to that volume is not at all surprising when one considers its self-conscious Celtic-ness.⁶² The lines “the swallow moon/Skims the pale waters of the sky” remind one of “the sparrow in the eaves / The brilliant moon and all the milky sky” and “white birds [. . .] hung low on the rim of the sky” and especially “the

⁵⁹ *The Dublin Magazine* (July-Sept 1939): 8.

⁶⁰ *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996) 160.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 16.

⁶² *The Rose* establishes its ancient, Celtic, natural-world subject matter in its opening invocation, “To The Rose upon the Rood of Time”: “*Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days! / Come near me, while I sing the ancient ways: / Cuchulain battling with the bitter tide; / The Druid, grey, wood-nurtured, quiet-eyed, / Who cast round Fergus dreams, and ruin untold; / And thine own sadness, whereof stars, grown old / In dancing silver-sandalled round the sea, / Sing in their high and lonely melody*” (*Ibid.* 31).

pale waters in their wintry race, / under the passing stars, foam of the sky”.⁶³ One also wonders whether Thomas’s choice to end the poem with an image of the stars is not inspired, at least in part, by W. B. Yeats, whose early lyrics often end on an evocative image of the stars. For example, Yeats concludes “When You Are Old” with “a crowd of stars” and ends “Who Goes With Fergus?” with the image of “dishevelled, wandering stars”.⁶⁴ Of course R. S. Thomas would most famously use the image of stars as the final image of “A Peasant”, which concludes with Iago Prytherch “Enduring like a tree under the curious stars” (*SF* 14). While this adjective, “curious”, has been interpreted in different ways, its most basic meaning—“intrigued” or “interested”—is, interestingly, the exact opposite of Yeats’s choice of adjective in “A Dream of Death”, where a woman dies in an unknown land and “the peasants” leave her to the “indifferent stars”.⁶⁵

But what is perhaps most Yeatsian about “The Bat” is the way nature is once again tied to what might be called R. S. Thomas’s “Celtic Romanticism”—his ardour for aboriginal antiquity that increasingly pulled him westward in the late 30s and early 40s. One notices that such references in “The Bat” are also tied to warfare and the west, to “the ancient wars” at “sunset” and the ghostly, “spectral” reminiscence of past battles, images reinforced by the verb “hunt”. Yeats, of course, in addition to writing about mythological battles, also wrote scores of verses in memory of Ireland’s patriots—O’Leary, MacDonagh, and McBride, among others—and what he saw as the sacrifices they made for Ireland’s cause. Reading “The Bat”, one does not encounter any overt patriotism on Thomas’s part, but one is confronted with his awe of historical battles. In fact, one cannot help but recall an autobiographical passage that uses very similar imagery, describing Thomas’s train journeys of years earlier, journeys taken while he was in college:

⁶³ From “The Sorrow of Love”, “The White Birds”, and “The Rose of the World”, respectively. *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 40; 41; 36.

⁶⁴ *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 41; 43. Both of these poems come from *The Rose*.

⁶⁵ *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 42. “A Dream of Death” is also from *The Rose*.

During my period in theological college in Llandaff, I used to travel home on the train from Cardiff. [. . .] Westwards the sky would be ablaze, reminding one of the battles of the past. Against that radiance the hills rose dark and threatening as if full of armed men waiting for a chance to attack. To the west, therefore, there was a romantic, dangerous, mysterious land. (A 10)⁶⁶

The young R. S. Thomas would soon change his tune about battle being something romantic. He would, in fact, admit the innocence (and futility) of his earlier, romantic view in what might be seen as delayed self-mockery. These very images of battle and sky, described elsewhere as “the spilled blood / That went to the making of the wild sky”, eventually become part of R. S. Thomas’s awareness that these spectral hours are (in part because of his countrymen’s indifference to them) full of nothing but “sham ghosts” (“Welsh Landscape” AL 26). But this would constitute only one aspect of Thomas’s extremely complex feelings toward Wales and the Welsh people, and in any case was still years away. In the late 1930s, R. S. Thomas “would [continue to] gaze hopelessly at [the Welsh hills]” (A 49), and his attraction to a romantic, Celtic way of life was not yet soured by war’s non-romantic realities, or by what he perceived as the indifference of his countrymen to preserving Wales’ Celtic past as something beyond a tourist attraction. The immediate attraction of W. B. Yeats, then, was that the Irish poet, in Thomas’s own words, “echoed the *hiraeth* for the west that he was experiencing at the time” (A 45). In fact, it was on a similar train journey to the one described above that Thomas “was supposedly to meet his *alter ego*, W. B. Yeats; and it was out of those hills that his Muse was to appear”.⁶⁷

The above examples show how Thomas’s early attraction to Yeats’s Celtic-ness led him to absorb much of the register and diction of *The Rose* and, in “The Bar”, Yeats’s

⁶⁶ Of course the Celtic-ness of ancient skies is also very Yeatsian. In “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” (Ibid. 33), for example, Yeats describes the “wonder” of Cuchulain’s eyes as “Spring upon the ancient skies”. Those eyes cause his “sweetheart” to ponder “on the glory of his days” as “all around the harp string told his praise”. R. S. Thomas, incidentally, wanted a Celtic harpist to play for his parents on the night before his wedding, “like a *neithior*, a traditional Welsh marriage-feast” (A 49), another example of his attraction to Celtic Romanticism.

⁶⁷ M. Wynn Thomas, “For Wales See Landscape” 22.

metrics. But it must be understood that Thomas's stylistic debt to Yeats was not largely a metrical one. Yeats was one of the great masters of metrics and the conjunction of lines. He explored the potential of traditional forms and expanded the capacities of metrical prosody. But Yeats at his most innovative still remains an accentual-syllabic poet. This is by no means a weakness—indeed, it is one of Yeats's strengths—but it is worth mentioning because the same cannot be said for R. S. Thomas, who, by the time he was discovering Yeats, was already on the verge of moving toward the more accentual prosody that would become the strength of his Manafon style. Perhaps some definitions will be helpful here. Simply put, an accentual prosody counts only the accents in a line. A syllabic prosody counts only the syllables. An accentual-syllabic prosody, for its part, counts both accents and syllables and is arranged into metrical *feet*, conventional units of stressed and unstressed syllables.

R. S. Thomas's sub-Shelleyan songs, his sub-Georgian nature musings, and a few sub-Yeatsian lyrics like "The Bat" were largely accentual-syllabic poems, composed of iambic stanzas with little variation. But by the 1940s, R. S. Thomas was already moving toward an accentual prosody, one that allows the accents to change positions from line to line and become less predictable while still preserving a sense of order. A good example of this is the poem "Hiraeth" (SF 34):

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

For I remember now at the growth of night
The great hills and the yellow light
Stroking to softness the harsh sweep
Of limb and shoulder above the quiet deep.

And in the glitter of stars. shoal upon shoal,
Thicker than bubbles in Ceridwen's bowl,
The running of the sea under the wind,
Rough with silver, comes before my mind.

Autumn shakes out the thistle's curse
 On the grey air, and my leafless house,
 Picked clean by frost and rain,
 Cowers naked upon the plain;

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

While syllable count varies substantially from line to line, each line of “Hiraeth” has four accented syllables. Moreover, these accents do not fall in the same place in each line. For example, the syllable count in the first stanza, from line to line, is 7, 7, 10, and 6, respectively. The accented syllables in line one are the 2nd, 3rd, 5th, and 7th syllables; but in line four, the 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 5th syllables are accented. This variation, in both syllable count and placement of accent, continues throughout the entire poem. While the poem is Yeatsian in its insistence on Celtic subject matter, its diction, its register, and its longing, it is not metrically Yeatsian. This, then, is where the two poets part ways: *metrically*. And the divide between them would widen as R. S. Thomas further loosened his lines in the 1950s, then widen even more as he embraced non-metrical, linear prosodies in the 60s and 70s. Even *The Tower* (1928), arguably Yeats’s most experimental work, is largely a collection of accentual-syllabic pentameter stanzas, tetrameter stanzas, and ballad stanzas, all quite dissimilar to R. S. Thomas’s loosened, stress-heavy, largely accentual stanzas of the 1940s. Therefore, Hooker’s assertion—that Iago Prytherch gave Thomas a “plod[ding] [. . .] down-to-earth” escape, a “linguistic [. . .] liberation” from a very Yeatsian style—is correct to the degree that Prytherch reflects Thomas’s movement away from a Yeatsian diction and register.⁶⁸ But R. S. Thomas never fully immersed himself in Yeats’s accentual-syllabics; consequently, he did not need to struggle to break free of the metrical influence of Yeats in the same way that, for example, Vernon Watkins did.

⁶⁸ Jeremy Hooker, “The True Wales of my Imagination: Welsh and English in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas, David Jones and Gillian Clarke”, *Imagining Wales* (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2001) 33.

Apart from its demonstration of Thomas's accentual prosody, "Hiraeth" also reveals a decided Celtic-ness—what might be called a self-conscious "Welshification"—and this deserves further discussion. Beginning with the title, the poet is attempting to make "Hiraeth" a "Welsh" poem by infusing it with Welsh place names and a sense of Welsh history. This attempt demonstrates Thomas's growing longing for Welsh identity and, it should be observed, at least some exposure to Welsh mythology. For example, the comparison of the sea with "Ceridwen's bowl" is an attempt to bring Welsh legend—in this case that of Ceridwen's cauldron and the birth of Taliesin—into the poem. It is an affected comparison, one with no poetic purpose other than its Welshness, as if the poet is at pains to be admitted to, or at least borrow from, the majesty of ancient Wales⁶⁹. In fact, the poem concludes with the very image of "old royalty" as Thomas compares the sea with a purple robe. It is likely that this inclusion of Welsh myth owes something to Yeats's frequent use of Irish myth, for the poem, which is about a very Celtic longing (for the west) would have reminded Thomas of Yeats; indeed, the inclusion of these "Welsh" elements reveals what is also a very Yeatsian desire: to be part of, and write poetry from within, the cultural tradition of one's country:

*Know, that I would accounted be
True brother of a company
That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong,
Ballad and story, rann and song;
Nor be I any less of them,
Because the red-rose-bordered hem
Of her, whose history began
Before God made the angelic clan,
Trails all about the written page.⁷⁰*

Rather than altering the number of syllables between lines, Yeats manipulates his lines by means of metrical substitutions, enjambment, and caesurae. Indeed, few poets, if any, can

⁶⁹ "Hiraeth" was first published in 1946, several years before Thomas would begin to bemoan the irretrievable loss of that majesty in poems such as "Welsh Landscape" and "Welsh History", both of which appear in *An Acre of Land* (1952).

⁷⁰ From "To Ireland in the Coming Times", *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 50. This poem is the last poem in *The Rose*.

manipulate an accentual-syllabic line as well as W. B. Yeats. He is Modern enough to not be strangled by syllable count (in the eighth line, for example, he does not compress “the angelic” to “th’angelic” as eighteenth-and nineteenth-century poets would have done), but his lines remain accentual-syllabic nonetheless and therefore differ from the lines of “Hiraeth”. This comparison, in fact, is a good summation of Thomas’s early relationship to Yeats: the poets are frequently one in ideology, but rarely (and increasingly less) one in metrics.

It is here that one must also distinguish between Thomas’s stylistic response to Yeats and his thematic responses to Yeats, the latter of which continue throughout his entire *oeuvre* and, though they cannot be justly examined in the present discussion of style, have yet to be documented as they deserve. In 1946, Keidrych Rhys sent a questionnaire to a group of Welsh writers, and in response to the question “For whom do you write?” Thomas began by quoting a Yeats quatrain: “All day I look in the face / What I hoped ‘twould be / To write for my own race / And the reality”. And in response to the question, “What is your opinion of the relationship between Literature and Society?” Thomas began his answer with “Yeats’s gyres”.⁷¹ In fact, R. S. Thomas would continue to use Yeats as a sounding board, alluding to him, even naming him in the poems. Two examples come from the poems “The Moon in Lleyn” (*LS* 30), where the speaker says, “it is easy to believe Yeats was right”, and “Waiting” (*BHN* 83), which begins, “Yeats said that”. And in addition to the obvious responses where Thomas names Yeats, there are unspecified responses; for example, gyres, cones, moon phases, and cyclical journeys recur in the late poetry. Indeed, Thomas’s imaginative connection to Yeats did not fade even though his style became progressively less Yeatsian.

It is here, then, that we return to the imagined meeting between Yeats and Thomas, that supposed encounter on a train that takes place in the poem “Memories of

⁷¹ “Replies to ‘Wales’ Questionnaire 1946”, *Wales* 6.3 (1946): 22.

Yeats Whilst Travelling to Holyhead" (SF 22). In the poem, the speaker mentions the Welsh hills that he sees as "aloof" and "resentful of strangers", and M. Wynn Thomas identifies the similarity between Thomas's aforementioned status, as an outsider in search of an "insider knowledge" of his country, and the journey of Yeats, who became a nationalist poet "by dreaming his perverse dreams of belonging". While the poem's metrics are not at all Yeatsian,

that train on which R. S. met Yeats was therefore the appropriate trope for representing both their conditions—figures prominently in transit, personalities actually constituted of psychic passage, poets all of whose poems were transitional, and individuals who were endlessly travelling towards the endlessly deferred "home"[. . .].⁷²

It is therefore also here, on this very journey, that Thomas's response to W. B. Yeats crosses tracks with his response to Edward Thomas, whose similar longing for "home" we have already discussed. And yet, the last line of the poem, "I had known reality dwindle, the dream begin", also inspires a simpler reading of the poem. Considering what we know about R. S. Thomas's early debt to nature poetry and its imaginative expression, the "dream" can simply be interpreted as an escape to that imaginative existence, to that dream-like place from where poetry emerges. "Memories of Yeats While Traveling to Holyhead" is, on its most basic level, about this very idea. Yeats is surrounded by "the metrical train, the monosyllabic sea", but he is "impervious and cold to the outward scene", "heedless of nature's baubles". The poetry comes from somewhere within Yeats the *dreamer*, not from his environment. In this light, the poem, with its almost reverent tone, can also be seen as an elegy-of-sorts for Yeats (who died in 1939), with the speaker, clearly Thomas himself, paying strong tribute to "the dream" of W. B. Yeats. Indeed, it is this dream—a Celtic vision shared in the Celtic twilight—that, even more than a confederacy of travelling strangers, knits the two poets "closer than lovers".⁷³

⁷² "For Wales See Landscape" 40.

⁷³ From "Memories of Yeats Whilst Travelling to Holyhead".

With the idea of dreaming in mind, we need to return to, and expand upon, a previously quoted passage:

In 1938 [. . .] under the influence of the beautiful and exciting country to the west he continued to write poetry—tender, innocent lyrics in the manner of the Georgian poets, because that was his background to his reading among the poets. Edward Thomas was one of his favourites and because the latter had written about the countryside, the budding poet tried to imitate him. The more ‘modern’ English poets, such as Hopkins, Wilfred Owen, Pound and Eliot had not yet broken through to his inner world to shatter the unreal dreams that dwelled there. (A 44-5)

Besides re-emphasizing Thomas’s earliest debt to Georgianism and Edward Thomas, this passage contains, almost as an undercurrent, two factors that would quickly become the primary catalysts for the stylistic development we have been discussing: Wales and war. The first of these, Thomas’s attraction to Wales, is here described in the context of the “unreal dreams” of his “inner world”, the very world that manifested itself in his earliest poetry as little birds, golden songs, and dew-covered mushrooms. By the late 1930s, Wales, “the beautiful and exciting country to the west”, was already an imaginative influence, but it is also important to note that Thomas did not yet have any kind of nationalist agenda. It may very well be the case that Thomas’s Welsh nationalism has its roots in his early, romantic vision of Wales, a vision that quite literally came under fire with the onset of World War II. Certainly Thomas’s autobiographical writings lead one to this conclusion, and we have already established that by the late 1930s, Thomas had come to associate his feelings about nature and community with what he envisioned as a Celtic way of life. But one must also point out that the autobiographies were all written decades later, long after Thomas had established his reputation as a Welsh nationalist, and his autobiographical work is to some degree an attempt to re-see an English upbringing from a Welsh point of view. Again, for R. S. Thomas, this point of view was one of estrangement and loneliness, which can perhaps partially account for the title of his primary autobiography, *Neb* or “No One”, which is written in the third person. But

this point of view did not exist (indeed, could not have existed) in the late 1930s. As we have already established, Thomas's early, romantic dreams owe as much to Shelley, English Georgianism, and the work of Edward Thomas as they do to Yeats and Fiona McLeod, and none of these writers is Welsh (though R. S. Thomas, as part of his re-seeing things from a Welsh point of view, does attempt to make Edward Thomas into a Welsh poet).⁷⁴ We can conclude, then, that the "exciting country to the west" was part of a larger, Celtic dream, but not (yet) a Welsh-specific one.

With this in mind, one is not *wholly* surprised to learn that R. S. Thomas, the future Welsh nationalist, contemplated a move to Ireland in 1941. Again, his Celtic romanticism was not Welsh-specific, and one recalls that Thomas had been extremely moved by his journey to Galway a few years earlier, where he experienced "the country of which Yeats had sung, a land of common folk, their language Irish and their ways traditionally Celtic" (A 47-8). This was the very communal life Thomas longed for, and he had not found it in Wales. Thus, Thomas wrote to Seamus O'Sullivan, who had been publishing Thomas's work in *The Dublin Magazine*, and whom Thomas had visited during his 1938 excursion to Ireland. The response came in September, 1941:

From anything I have been able to learn about the present situation of the Protestant Church in Ireland, I am strongly of the opinion that it would be extremely unwise for you to make any change at the moment. A great many of the churches throughout Ireland—both in city and country districts—have been shut . . . I am sorry that I cannot give you more heartening news, but I think you would really be well-advised to retain your present position for the time being.

And then the last sentence of the letter:

"You would, I fear, find that you would be more of an exile in the West of Ireland than in Wales".⁷⁵

⁷⁴ *cf.* footnote 54.

⁷⁵ The letter, until recently in the possession of the late poet and antiquarian bookseller Peter Jolliffe, founder of London's Ulysses Bookshop, is quoted in Byron Rogers, *The Man Who Went Into the West: The Life of R. S. Thomas* (London: Aurum, 2006) 55.

The letter from Thomas to O'Sullivan does not survive, but presumably the young curate of Hanmer had expressed to O'Sullivan that he felt himself an exile in his own country. In essence, R. S. Thomas was living in, but finding himself perpetually outside of, a "real" Wales. He was what Grahame Davies has called a "resident alien".⁷⁶ Despite his birth and upbringing, he was effectively an Englishman looking at Wales from the outside, writing with "materials drawn from the English repertoire of images of Wales".⁷⁷ Indeed, before his move to Manafon in 1942, Thomas was writing from a position scarcely within Wales at all: both Chirk and Hanmer are only just within the Welsh border, hence the significance of his looking westwards from Hanmer *into* Wales, from a point of view effectively outside it. And his physical location mirrored his emotional state. He was, he felt, nowhere and no one.⁷⁸

But the unrest of the early 1940s was about to change R. S. Thomas. As Jeremy Hooker has observed, R. S. Thomas would (like W. B. Yeats before him) refashion himself—or at least begin the process of refashioning himself—as a nationalist poet. Thomas would recast himself not only as a Welshman, but also as a Welsh poet capable of speaking to Wales from within, as a member of its historical community.⁷⁹ In other words, in the discord of war, and then in its aftermath, Thomas would look to Wales

⁷⁶ "Resident Aliens: R. S. Thomas and the Anti-modern Movement" 50. *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays* 7 (2001-02), 50-77. Davies describes Thomas as part of a group of writers that reject the modern world and withdraw via "the escape-route of transcendentalism". According to Davies, other writers in this group include T. S. Eliot, Saunders Lewis, and Simone Weil. These writers reject modernity and escape to the mountains of mysticism and unspoilt nature, where a transcendent religious vision might still be realised.

⁷⁷ "For Wales See Landscape" 21-45.

⁷⁸ In addition to contemplating a move to Ireland, it appears that in his search for a more communal, Celtic life, Thomas at least considered the possibility of creating his own Innisfree on a remote island. Rogers quotes from a letter that Thomas received in June of 1941 from the Scottish naturalist Frank Fraser Darling, who was living on the Isle of Tanera Mor, one of the Summer Isles (the only inhabited one) in the Scottish highlands. In the letter, Darling advises Thomas not to give up his high calling as a priest for "anything so rash" as moving off to a remote island. Darling writes, "What can you do with your hands? If you cannot use them in a score of different ways you could not live this kind of life at all". Rogers states that had Thomas made this move, it would have been "in the interests of better birdwatching", but clearly the motivation for writing to Darling was much more complex than Rogers allows (*The Man Who Went into the West* 54). It is possible that Thomas was influenced by Darling's book *Island Years* (1940), which describes his experience living on the island.

⁷⁹ *Imagining Wales* 28-29.

specifically, rather than to a general Celtic-ness, for potential stability. The displaced curate, who had recently contemplated leaving Wales to pursue his dream in Ireland or on some Innisfree-like island, would instead construct a Welsh foundation upon which to build both an identity for himself and, as will become clear, a corresponding direction for his poetry.

Returning to the above-quoted excerpt from *Neb*, we find Thomas describing not only his “unreal dreams”, but the “shattering” of those dreams, which allowed a more “modern” style to “break through to his inner world”. While not the solitary cause of that shattering and breaking, World War II administered the main blows. As he witnessed German bombing raids and a burning Merseyside—as he and his wife huddled under their stairs in a make-shift bomb shelter⁸⁰—the poet began to realize (consciously or otherwise) that Georgianism—at least the sweet and symmetrical variety he had been imitating—was simply an inadequate representation of the asymmetrical world he was shocked into confronting. His lyrical songs were swept off in the whirlwinds of war, and he found new forms that better reflected the external chaos and noise around him. Put simply, the foundation of R. S. Thomas’s poetry was changing, and this because R. S. Thomas’s own foundation was being “rocked [. . .] to its white root” (“Propaganda”, *SF* 14).

The Storm’s Hysteria

Wandering, wandering, hoping to find
The ring of mushrooms with the wet rind,
Cold to the touch, but bright with dew,
A green asylum from time’s range.

And finding instead the harsh ways
Of the ruinous wind and the clawed rain;

⁸⁰ “The curate decided to erect an earthwork against the wall of the parsonage, opposite the space under the stairs, as a shelter, should more bombs start to fall. One night when he was leaving the church, which was next door to the house, he heard a terrible bang very close by. He ran inside and urged his wife to come and take cover under the stairs, and there they were for hours, while the enemy aeroplanes circled above their heads” (A 50).

The storm's hysteria in the bush;
The wild creatures and their pain.

This poem, simply entitled “Song” (*AL* 27), is one of several poems collected in *Song at the Year's Turning* which have the word “song” as part of their titles. Reading the poem, we find that instead of letting metre and syllable count dictate vocabulary and syntax as he did in the late thirties, Thomas employs the flexible, four-stress line we saw in “Hiraeth”, a line that can adapt to accommodate its subject matter. The repetition of “wandering” in the first line both produces a walking rhythm and lengthens the act of wandering itself; commas slow the line, making that wandering a longer process. This rhythm and pace is much more appropriate to the poem's tone of despondency and lamentation than an iambic line could be (a much more effective and appropriate “wandering” than, say, “I wandered lonely as a cloud”). We also notice that Thomas does not use consistent end-rhyme. The first quatrain opens with a couplet but does not close with one, and the second quatrain uses a ballad stanza rhyme scheme (*abcb*), so that the rhymes (and lack thereof) import a sense of uneasiness by defying expectation. But the most striking technique in the poem, that which most patently demonstrates a development from the style of the 1939 poems, is the way Thomas phrases the lines, using stress to set up a point and counterpoint between the two stanzas. In the first stanza, stressed syllables fall on adjectives that refer, again, to those idyllic, dewy mushrooms and the past innocence they represent: “wet”, “cold”, “bright”, “green”; the properties of those mushrooms leap from the stanza, and yet, ironically, they do so only to assert their absence. The magical world they represent has been swept off in the “storm's hysteria”, replaced by what is ultimately a world of pain.⁸¹ Thus, in the second stanza, Thomas stresses harsher elements and groups his stresses to accentuate

⁸¹ One notes that we are beginning to speak with the vocabulary of the book of Job, from which *The Stones of the Field* takes its title, and from which Thomas will imbibe phrases and tonal registers in forthcoming volumes.

abrasiveness: “harsh ways”, “ruinous wind”, “clawed rain”. The poem is, in fact, a formal illustration of a harsh awakening.

To further illustrate this awakening, it is rewarding to reach back and compare Thomas’s 1939 quatrains—

The waters strive to wash away
 The frail path of her melody,
 This little bird across the lake
 That links her gentle soul with me.

O wind and wave thou wilt not break,
 Uncouth and lusty as thou art,
 The light thread of this golden song
 That shines so deep into my heart.⁸²

—with the first poems he published in Wales, a group of five poems that appeared in Keidrych Rhys’s *Wales* in 1943.⁸³ By 1943, the “Uncouth and lusty” waves, the potentially-visceral image of which is masked by a primitive and lofty diction, have given way, in “The Labourer”, to “the brown bilge of earth”, whose colour and texture—due in large part to the plosive “b”, but also owing to the combination of the liquid “l” and palatal “g” in “bilge”—retain the properties of fluidity, but are now visually and aurally tangible as well, fixing both ear and eye on the texture of earth. Likewise, the “golden song” of 1939, with its long, sonorous “o” vowels, has hardened, in the 1943 poem “Frost”, to “the white cataract of song, / Pent up behind the stony tongue” so that the “song” is more abrasive, largely because of the poem’s crisp dentals and velars, which sharpen and slow the line to mirror the poem’s subject: a hard, icy winter.⁸⁴ One also notes that both “songs” are given colours, but unlike the fresh sound of “white [. . .] song”, “golden song” cannot rise above the haze of cliché. Nor does it have the

⁸² NLW 20006 C.

⁸³ *Wales* 2.2. (1943): “The Labourer”, “A Farmer”, “Frost”, “Propaganda”, and “Confessions of an Anglo-Welshman”. Prior to this, Thomas had published poems under the pseudonyms Curtis Langdon and Figaro in *Omnibus*, a student publication of University College of North Wales, Bangor, and, as we have already discussed, *The Dublin Magazine*. He had also published poems in *The New English Weekly* (1939) and *Horizon* (1941 – “Homo Sapiens”).

⁸⁴ Thomas refers to the way consonants “arrest [...] the movement of a line” in “Words and the Poet” (SP 53).

metaphorical properties of “cataract”, which, in addition to a waterfall or deluge, can of course denote an impairing opacity of the eye. If read in this way, the “cataract of song”, rather than demonstrating the song’s waterfall fluidity, actually obscures its melody. Therefore, when the song is “Pent up behind the stony tongue” thematically, it is also pent up formally; moreover, that initial spondee—“pent up”—momentarily freezes the thematic song within the poetic structure. Thus, even as he impedes the thematic “song”, Thomas augments the song that is the poem itself. In this marriage of form and content, the “cataract” is both fluid *and* obscure; the poem’s irony (and its measure of success) is that it stutters into song.

One also notices that Thomas’s developing diction and improving imagistic facility are accompanied by a marked metrical progression. Instead of the tight stanzas of rote iambs we find in 1939, again we discover, by 1943, a largely accentual poetry consisting of loose, iambic frames with syllabic variance. Instead of filling-out traditional forms with what Anstey, referring to those 1939 poems, calls “a pedantic adherence to syllabic balance”,⁸⁵ Thomas begins to use form as a means of directing the reader’s temporal experience of a poem. Here, for example, is the beginning of another of the 1943 poems, “The Labourer”:⁸⁶

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?

The specifics of what might be called Thomas’s “Manafon style”—his tendency, for example, to use his flexible, accentual prosody to place stressed syllables together in clusters (i.e. “bare racks of bone”) and to arrange his stresses so that they coincide with palpable elements from the setting (*winds, skin, bone, face, stone*)—will be treated in the next chapter. For now, though, one notices in particular how the poem begins. The first line begins with iambic phrasing, but the initial iamb is headless, which makes the first three

⁸⁵ Anstey, “Uncollected Poems and Variant Readings” 24.

⁸⁶ Reprinted as “A Labourer” in *SF* 8.

feet read quickly.⁸⁷ Then the reader runs into a medial caesura. The effect of this is that the reader is introduced to the poetic subject and then must immediately pause to consider “his years”. That reflective pause is extended by the two unstressed syllables immediately following the caesura, which effectively become part of it, lengthening it, obliging the reader to wait for the next stress. The phrasing then resets itself, and the next two lines are a largely-iambic succession of developmental images that keep the reader’s attention where it has been placed: on the labourer. This is no coincidence. The poem is, in fact, less about a labourer than it is about *seeing* a labourer, *considering* him, not averting our eyes from him. Through prosody, Thomas, as he so often does, directs our eyes, here requiring us to “consider this man in the field beneath”.⁸⁸ The form of the poem, even more than its subject matter, directs our attention.

One might also, in looking at these opening lines of “The Labourer”, point out how the initial spondaic effect in line two “tightens” the skin, and how the pyrrhic-spondee phrasing of “on the bare racks” heightens that effect while simultaneously emphasizing the barrenness and inscrutability of the labourer’s face, the image of which is as featureless as a smooth stone.⁸⁹ But the point is, simply, that where in 1939 the poem’s metre seems fixed and arbitrary, its relation to content superficial, Thomas has, by 1943, begun to unify form and content, which are, as he tells us in his introduction to his selection of Wordsworth’s poetry, “as inseparable as body and soul in a human being”.⁹⁰ He has begun to make use of poetry’s communicative properties, its ability to command and control an act of attention from a reader. This sense of poetry, as a medium of communication controlled by the operations of prosody, is perhaps the most

⁸⁷ The term “feet” is technically not correct when discussing accentual poetry since “feet” exist only in metrical (syllabic and accentual-syllabic) poetry. It is therefore more correct to talk of “phrasing” or “rhythmic patterning” when discussing Thomas’s non-metrical prosodies. Terms such as “iambic phrasing” and “spondaic effect” are used for convenience to describe rhythmic patterns.

⁸⁸ This is the first line of “Affinity” (SF 20).

⁸⁹ Prytherch’s “inscrutable” nature, which ironically defies the charge we are given to observe him, is given its own discussion in the next chapter.

⁹⁰ *A Choice of Wordsworth’s Verse*, ed. R. S. Thomas (London: Faber, 1971) 18.

fundamental aspect of Thomas's style; indeed, it will remain an underlying attribute of even his most progressive stylistic experiments.

One might argue, of course, that these comparisons are unfruitful, that it is hardly prudent to pit the style of Thomas's early, derivative work against his slightly more established verses. After all, in 1939, the poet was still trying to find his voice. He was, by his own admission, still under the influence of *The Golden Treasury*, the Georgians, and the more saccharine verses of Shelley. He was hardly attempting to play with double meanings, use unexpected imagery, or arrange sound and stress patterns in the way he was beginning to by 1943. Quite true, and this is precisely why such a comparison is rewarding. Some unswerving essentials of R. S. Thomas's style, from *The Stones of the Field* to *Residues* (2002), are his formal awareness and his striking, sometimes shocking use of imagery.⁹¹ The critical value of the preceding comparisons is that they demonstrate just how quickly Thomas began to develop his facility for manipulating image, metaphor, and metrics. While the 1939 and 1943 "styles" of R. S. Thomas are not, in fact, very distant chronologically, they are vastly different stylistically.

The above comparisons, then, obviously reveal a drastic stylistic change. We have already discussed at length one reason for this change: Thomas's feelings of displacement and homelessness, which spurred his "disturbing muse" and initiated his quest to find the Wales of his imagination. What we have not discussed is the effect of war on the young poet, the trauma of German bombs, which profoundly disturbed R. S. Thomas and also convinced him to uproot and move westward. These factors, it should be observed, are by no means mutually exclusive, and two autobiographical prose passages will help us understand how they relate. The first is from *Y Llybtrau Gynt* (Former Paths):

⁹¹ Even when Thomas eventually abandons metrical prosody in favour of linear prosody, his awareness of form remains. In fact, one might argue that the absence of set metrics forces the poet to be *more* aware of the forms he uses since there is no received form to "fill-in", and since he must constantly guard against formlessness.

Having been curate of Chirk [. . .] for four years, I decided to get married. The vicar did not want a curate who was married. [. . .] There was a charge in [Hanmer] that was vacant at the time, and since there was a suitable house, it was there that we went, in effect to the heart of the English plains—that part of Flintshire between Wrexham and Cheshire. And from there, some fifteen miles away, I saw at dusk the hills of Wales rising, telling as before of enchanting and mysterious things. I realized what I had done. That was not my place, on the plain amongst Welshmen with English accents and attitudes. I set about learning Welsh, in order to be able to return to the true Wales of my imagination. (A 10)

Reading this passage, one might conclude that it was Thomas's *hiraeth* alone that inspired him to learn Welsh and relocate to Manafon, where he hoped to find “the true Wales” that existed in his imagination. But the decision was more complex than that. The following passage is from *Neb* (No-one):

Sometimes the Germans would drop a few bombs in the area, after seeing a light somewhere perhaps, but without injuring anyone, thanks to the open nature of the land. [. . .] The curate decided to erect an earthwork against the wall of the parsonage, opposite the place under the stairs, should more bombs start to fall. One night when he was leaving the church, which was next door to the house, he heard a terrible bang very close by. He ran inside and urged his wife to come and take cover under the stairs, and there they were for hours, while the enemy airplanes circled over their heads. [. . .] Many bombs were dropped on the area that night, and the hill country in the vicinity of Minera was set on fire. [. . .] So hateful was it to the curate to think of the destruction occurring almost every night, and such was his *hiraeth* for the hills in the distance [. . .] that he decided to learn Welsh as a means of enabling him to return to the true Wales. (A 49-50)

Here again is the “real” Wales, the “true Wales”, which existed in Thomas's mind as a Welsh-speaking community somewhere in the distant west. We have already established that Thomas began to feel the gravity of Wales pulling him in the late 1930s, several years before German planes began circling over his head, and the Welsh hills he gazed upon were emblematic of both his past and the future. That repeated phrase—“return to the true Wales”—is telling. As we have already discussed, Thomas's felt himself a stranger in Wales, an outsider, not a part of it in any sense that this “return” might mean a physical “return”, as on the Holyhead train or otherwise. Rather, this was a return to the imaginative vision of Wales he had formed in his past, one that Yeats, Macleod, and

Edward Thomas helped inspire in him. But it was also a “return” to a future, to a theoretical place where he might one day feel “at home” and no longer a “resident alien”. Reading this passage, however, we also realize that, significant as Thomas’s *hiraeth* for the hills was to his vision of his future, it was the shock of war that physically uprooted him, that exacerbated his desire to move west. He wrote elsewhere that although “a desire to have the whole of Wales open to me” was his main reason for learning Welsh, he was also motivated “partly by a cowardly wish to get away from [bombs]” in a place “where I did not belong”.⁹² Brown has observed that “Thomas would not have had to learn Welsh if he merely wanted to avoid German bombs”,⁹³ but the reverse is also true: R. S. Thomas did not have to uproot and move to Manafon to learn Welsh. Indeed, he began studying it while living in Flintshire, by travelling to Llangollen with his wife, where she had a painting class (A 50). In a general sense, then, R. S. Thomas could not root himself in the Welsh tradition that he longed for by remaining in Flintshire. But, in a much more immediate sense, he could not escape the flight path of the German Luftwaffe by remaining where he was. It has become a common view that R. S. Thomas did not confront technology until he reached Manafon, where tractors, harvesters, and other innovations had begun to reduce the need for hands-on labour. For example, Grahame Davies writes, “Modernity began to disturb [Thomas’s] world only in the late 1940s and early 1950s when mechanization started to affect the farmers in his mountain parishes”.⁹⁴ This is simply not the case. R. S. Thomas was forced to build a bomb shelter under his stairs in 1940. Modernity clearly affected him then, and it also affected his style.

War threw R. S. Thomas’s style into chaos. His poems of the early-to-mid 1940s show him frenetically, if not consciously, searching for a style capable of expressing the mayhem he was forced into confronting. His wartime poetry has been examined by M.

⁹² “Autobiographical Essay” 9.

⁹³ “The Problems of Belonging” 166.

⁹⁴ “Resident Aliens: R. S. Thomas and the Anti-modern Movement” 63.

Wynn Thomas, who writes of a poetry that “frequently comes from an imagination fearfully alerted by war to the ferocities of existence”, and who points out how “the Behemoth images [Thomas] used were very much part of the vocabulary of psychic stress during the Second World War”.⁹⁵ What deserves further discussion is how Thomas’s responses to the storms of war helped eradicate the “innocent plagiarist” of Chirk—the imitator with his eyes fixed on “the early morning mushroom” (*ERS* 75)—and contributed to the emergence of the more inventive poet of Manafon. It is true that the majority of these war poems were discarded from *Song at the Year’s Turning*, and one must acknowledge that “by omitting them Thomas presumably meant to indicate [. . .] that the early growing points of his authentic talent lay elsewhere”.⁹⁶ But these poems amount to more than juvenile throwaways. For R. S. Thomas, they were the stylistic equivalent of those German bombs. In their very composition, these poems shake off Shelley and jettison the Georgians; they effectively shatter Thomas’s ties to *The Golden Treasury*. Consciously or not, by experimenting with new techniques, R. S. Thomas was admitting that there was nothing in the poetry of his previous stylistic models that could adequately shape what he saw and what he felt. One notices, for example, the sonic impact of “Propaganda” (*SF* 10), first published as one of the above-mentioned 1943 poems, in *Wales*:

Nor shot, nor shell, but the fused word,
That rocks the world to its white root,
Has wrought a chaos in the mind,
Or drained the love from the split heart.

Nor shock, nor shower of the sharp blows,
That fall alike from life and death,
But some slow subsidence within,
That sinks a grave for the sapped faith.

In register, tone, and metrics, these quatrains are far removed from their 1939 counterparts. They are not “sugary”. They are explosive. Even as Thomas says *nor* shot,

⁹⁵ “R. S. Thomas: War Poet” 82-97.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 82.

nor shell, the line's prosody contradicts its literal meaning: similar-sounding, monosyllabic words, each beginning with a sibilant "sh" that opens onto a vowel, ring out like mortar rounds from the lines: *shot, shell, shock, sharp*. Five of the eight lines end with a spondee (two consecutive stressed syllables), and Thomas sets up each spondee by substituting a pyrrhic (two consecutive unstressed syllables) in the line's penultimate foot. The effect of this is similar to cocking a gun and then firing it; rising out of a pyrrhic, the impact of each terminal spondee is heightened, and the final words of the line are given extraordinary emphasis. In fact, those spondaic line endings alone give us a clue to Thomas's state of mind in the early 1940s: "split heart", "sharp blows", "sapped faith". The poem's rhymes (very approximate now, not at all chiming like the *breeze/trees* rhymes of the 30s) connect words almost imperceptibly. The *root/heart* rhyme subtly attaches the world's root, its very essence, to its "split heart" (and perhaps the poet's heart, or humanity's heart, or both). And the pairing of those two words reminds us of a line of the later poem "Song at the Year's Turning": "The heart's flower withers at the root". The *death/faith* rhyme is surely appropriate to that split heart, and to the "grave" that is being dug for faith in the final line. Assonance similarly ties key words together: the short "o" connects words of discord—*shot, rocks, wrought, chaos, shock, sharp*—and the long "o" connects the explosive *word* in line one to that which it affects in line two: *world, root*. Moreover, Thomas intentionally loads the poem with abrasive consonants: *rocks, white root, chaos, split heart, shock, sharp blows, sinks, sapped*—one can hardly read this list of dentals, plosives, and velars without spitting and shooting out air. "Propaganda" is an important poem not because of any pedestrian, paraphrasable poetic theme (*i.e.*, internal, propagandized words in one's mind can be more damaging than external bombs), or because it represents the stylistic direction in which Thomas's poems were heading (it does not; there is nothing else quite so "explosive" in *The Stones of the Field*, and the poem uses an accentual-syllabic prosody, which Thomas had already largely moved away from).

Rather, “Propaganda” is an important poem because of the effect of its detonation, which freed R. S. Thomas from a Georgian grip, and because of *the message of its prosody*, the intensity of which gives us a good understanding of R. S. Thomas’s frame of mind, his emotional instability, in the early 1940s.

Another poem from the early 1940s that conveys the unrest of war-time, as well as the flux of style it generated, is “On a Portrait of Joseph Hone by Augustus John” (*SF* 35):

As though the brute eyes had seen
In the hushed meadows the weasel,
That would tear the soft down of the throat
And suck the veins dry
Of their glittering blood.

And the mouth formed to the cry,
That gushed from the cleft heart
And flowed coldly as spring water over
The stone lips.

Like “Propaganda”, this poem is a structural representation of instability, particularly when viewed in the light of Thomas’s pre-1940 work. Two obvious, yet major differences from earlier work are first, that this is a free verse poem, and second, that the stanzas are not symmetrical. Instead of clean, rectangular strophes, we find (again) inconsistent syllable counts between lines, varying line lengths within stanzas, and varying numbers of lines between stanzas. One also notices that the first stanza is a dependent clause with no resolution, and that its relationship to the second stanza is not entirely clear—again, a disquieting experience for the reader. The first stanza could be the beginning of a sentence that is cut-off or, more likely, the end of a sentence that began “off-stage”, the continuation of a thought the poet is aware of but does not share. Either way, the effect is unsettling. The reader is knocked off balance, and the other prosodic elements of the poem do nothing to re-balance him or her. End-rhyme, for example, has all but vanished. There is one full rhyme (*dry/cry*) and one approximate rhyme

(*throat/heart*), but because there is no structured rhyme scheme, and because the rhymes cross the white space between stanzas, they actually reinforce the poem's asymmetry. And, we see here an early example of a line break (between the penultimate and final line) that does not correspond to syntax, which of course increasingly becomes a dominant feature of Thomas's later, systematically-enjambed poetry. Also, like "Propaganda", "On a Portrait" is a stress-heavy poem. Every line but one contains consecutive stresses (one cannot accurately call them spondaic feet because, again, the poem is not written in metre; but since its phrasing—each line begins with an unstressed syllable, then rises, falls, and rises again—is quite similar to that of an iambic poem, the paired stresses do act like spondaic feet within their respective lines): "brute eyes", "hushed meadows", "soft down", "veins dry" "mouth formed", "cleft heart", "flowed coldly", "stone lips". As we will see in the next chapter, these "stress pairings" become a consistent characteristic of Thomas's Manafon style. Yet Thomas uses his stresses very differently in this poem; instead of the explosive consonance we saw in "Propaganda", we now find softer consonants that stand in formal contrast to the poem's stress-heavy phrasing. The combination of labials, liquids, and low-frequency vowels creates gentle (but slightly ominous) sound structures like "in the hushed meadow the weasel", and open vowels close onto fricatives and labials to create soft landings, as in "soft down" and "mouth formed". And because the poem's phrasing links the stressed syllables in each line ("brute eyes [. . .] seen"; "sucked [. . .] veins dry"; "mouth formed [. . .] cry"; "gushed [. . .] cleft heart"), the soft consonants are disturbed by what they are tied to, and harsh actions rub up against soft sounds. For example, in the line, "That would tear the soft down of the throat", the stresses fall on "tear [. . .] soft down [. . .] throat", so that the stressed, harsh-sounding word "tear", which is set up by a pyrrhic, rips into the gentle-sounding "soft down". Then two more unstressed syllables prepare the reader to land on the hard-sounding word "throat". The significance of this is

obvious: the weasel—which in the context of the poem, as well as our argument, might represent war, turmoil, the chaos of the world, etc.—is formally tearing into soft nature, metrically assaulting it with a harder reality. Again, this is less what the poem is saying than what it is doing, less what it means than what it is. The poem's meaning is not just in its semantics or word choices. Its meaning also lies in *how* those words are expressed rhythmically. And of course one is faced with the realization that Thomas's view of nature, once full of golden birdsong and dewy mushrooms, has forever changed to something altogether darker, more ambiguous.

We might argue, then, that Thomas's very verse structures are, and will remain, his rhythmic responses to the world. What this means is that his prosody can, and often does, allow us a more direct understanding of his work than thematic analysis alone, which, while obviously necessary, can also diffuse poems by generating diluted prose summaries of works that were never meant to be rendered as prose. A poem's prosody, by its very nature, cannot be an extraneous grid one lays over it; rather, it is the very marrow and pith of its meaning. Thus, when taken for what they are, not merely what they say, these early poems manifest a life-altering chaos whose *rhythmic* presence is felt in R. S. Thomas's work well before we see that chaos fully expressed thematically. Thomas's poems divulge significant movements in his stylistic progression that he could not have articulated at the time.

Therefore, when it is read in the context of these early poems, John Barnie's assertion—that Thomas's *poetry* shows a post-Darwinian awareness that “the earlier romantic sense of grandeur and beauty of nature [. . .] must now be held in balance with what can seem to us to be nature's darker side”⁹⁷—is apt inasmuch as the *poems themselves* (as opposed to just the poet) are aware of nature's darker side. Thomas surely did not yet possess a full awareness (one hesitates to say “full understanding”, something that would

⁹⁷ “Was R. S. Thomas an Atheist Manqué?” *Echoes to the Amen* 62, italics added.

have killed his questioning poetry, and in any case is probably an impossibility) of natural selection and the world's brutality in 1940; but brutality is the very thing that threw his style into flux and generated poems composed out of chaos. Simply put, "Propaganda" and "On a Portrait of Joseph Hone by Augustus John" are not about R. S. Thomas's early experiences with "nature's darker side". They *are* those early experiences; that is, they are the sites at which such experiences are *rendered*. Born out of "the storm's hysteria", they mark a period of transition, and their stylistic elements were a chaotic causeway, leading toward the style that Thomas was about to find in the Montgomeryshire hills.

Chapter 2: A Style Emerging (1943-1955)

[. . .] a growing realization of the plight of my country, plus long pondering over the question of Anglo-Welsh writing, together with the desire to live up to the reputation for difference implied by the terms Welsh and Anglo-Welsh, have been responsible for certain experiments of mine both in subject matter and in technique. [. . .] For it seems to me that if we are unwilling to be called English poets, while at the same time we are averse from the title Anglo-Welsh, we have only the other to fall back on. But if we are to be known as Welsh poets then our work must be a true expression of the life of our country in all its forms.¹

The above excerpt is from a BBC radio broadcast entitled “The Poet’s Voice: By Rev. R. S. Thomas” and dated 21 August 1947, the year immediately following the publication of *The Stones of the Field* and five years after the poet’s move to the hills and moorland of Manafon, Montgomeryshire. It is a telling passage, one that demonstrates how the poet’s perception of his own identity, as both a Welshman and a Welsh artist, had developed since the late 1930s. It also demonstrates a shift in his conception of Wales. Thomas’s poetry of the late 1930s reveals his longing for a “real Wales” and a “true Wales”, but his conception of Wales as an entity remained nonetheless separate and “out there”, a Welsh-speaking community somewhere in the distant west. However, R. S. Thomas’s work of the Manafon period attempts to bring that vision of Wales within reach, to render what he above calls “a true expression”, *i.e.* a Welsh expression, of his country through the medium of English-language poetry. We might refer to this process as the intentional “Cymrification” of his work. Indeed, in “Some Contemporary Scottish Writing”, written in 1946, Thomas suggests that the “movement” towards a Welsh atmosphere in poetry may constitute “a phase in the re-cymrification of Wales” (JP 28). In essence, R. S. Thomas—a poet who only a few years earlier was still writing in an outmoded, Georgian style and finding inspiration in a Celtic Romanticism that, due in

¹ “The Poet’s Voice”, BBC Radio Broadcast, 21 August 1947. A broadcast time and date is given on the transcript (21 August, 1947, 6.40-6.55 pm), but the transcript also bears a hand-written note, “Not broadcast”, across the top.

part to its dream-like, magical quality, was necessarily distant—was now setting his feet upon, and attempting to root his poetry in, the Welsh soil beneath him. This was a process that began, as we will see, with the creation of “a deliberately Welsh character” called Iago Prytherch.²

In this process of poetic “rooting”, it was not Thomas’s subject matter alone that underwent changes. In the above excerpt, he remarks upon “certain experiments [. . .] both in subject matter *and* technique” which he had conducted by 1947 in an attempt to give his work a Welsh texture, or a Welsh air.³ This *stylistic* “Cymrification” of his poetry can be viewed as an outgrowth of his pre-existing desire for Welsh identity, as can his experiments with subject matter, for one recalls that Thomas’s move to Manafon, although exacerbated by World War II, was fuelled by his *hiraeth* for the Welsh hills and his pre-existing Celtic Romanticism. Thus, as he responded to the new tensions he confronted in Manafon, Thomas attempted to write a new kind of Anglo-Welsh poetry, one that Ned Thomas has called “a Welsh literature in English, strongly grounded in a knowledge of Welsh history, language, and literary tradition”.⁴ While Thomas eventually abandoned the idea that a distinctively “Welsh” poetry could be written in English, the Manafon period found him earnestly attempting to create a kind of poetry, as he put it in the above-mentioned broadcast, with “a strangely un-English sound about it”.⁵ Indeed, what R. S. Thomas writes of Hugh MacDiarmid and Scotland applies equally to his own writing of this period and its association with Wales: “it has been and still is MacDiarmid’s task to de-anglicize Scotland, and so get back to the native roots” (“Some Contemporary Scottish Writing” *SP* 24).

² R. S. Thomas, “The Poet’s Voice” 2.

³ Italics added. In this context, the title of *Welsh Airs* (1987), Thomas’s collection of both new and previously collected poems that deal overtly with Wales and Welshness, takes on an interesting resonance.

⁴ Ned Thomas and John Barnie, “Probings: An Interview with R. S. Thomas”, *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R.S. Thomas*, ed. William V. Davis (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1993) 28.

⁵ “The Poet’s Voice” 2.

In the last chapter, we discussed how the external conflict Thomas faced as a young curate was quickly internalized, becoming part of what we have called his “disturbing muse”, an inner unrest that led to stylistic changes in the poetry. And it was this inner unrest that fed Thomas’s longing for a Welsh identity. A similar pattern occurred when Thomas reached Manafon in 1942, where external tensions—although quite different from those created by World War II—heightened the poet’s own unease and further affected his style. The primary source of that external tension, and the element upon which critics have most commonly focused (albeit in a limiting manner), was the shock of the resident hill farmers and the harsh lives they led. Nothing in Thomas’s upbringing or his theological training had prepared him for what he encountered in Montgomeryshire. As he himself has said,

I came out of a kind of bourgeois environment which, especially in modern times, is protected; it’s cushioned from some of the harsher realities; and this muck and blood and hardness, the rain and the spittle and the phlegm of farm life was, of course, a shock to begin with and one felt that this was something not quite part of the order of things. But, as one experienced it and saw how definitely part of their lives this was, sympathy grew in oneself and compassion and admiration; and [. . .] the very fact that they endure at all—that they make a go of it at all—suggests some hard core within them.⁶

In this vein, one does not wish to re-plough well-furrowed ground. It has long been unnecessary (and is by now redundant) to point out how in poems such as “A Priest to His People” (*SF* 29) and “Affinity” (*SF* 20), Thomas expresses both “admiration” and “bitterness” for his parishioners, which ultimately amounts to “a love-hate relationship with the farmers”.⁷ And bearing in mind the arguments of the last chapter, namely that it was by responding to *pre*-Manafon conflict, not to these shocking hill farmers, that R. S. Thomas began to develop as a stylist, one feels that it is no longer appropriate to argue that “it was, surely, the gnawing bafflement and pity he felt when faced with people like

⁶ John Ormond, “R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet”, BBC film transcript, reprinted in *Poetry Wales* 7.4 (1972): 50.

⁷ Marie Thérèse-Castay, “The Self and the Other: the Autobiographical Element in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas”, *The Page’s Drift* 119.

Prytherch that set [R. S. Thomas] writing”.⁸ And yet, while there is no question that Thomas’s “disturbing muse” predates Prytherch’s emergence, his inner disturbance clearly deepened in Manafon, and the conflict that had already uprooted the poet, sending him “far inland, far inland” (“Hiraeth” *SF* 34), now found, in the lives of the resident hill farmers, a Welsh subject matter upon which to ground itself. As Thomas put it years later, “you can’t really change your style without changing your subject matter”.⁹ Throughout his career, his changes in both subject matter and style can be seen as two sides of the same developmental coin.

What is still very much in need of discussion, then, is not the well-worn idea that the residents of Manafon both compelled and infuriated R. S. Thomas, but rather how the emotions and tensions they inspired affected his stylistic development, and, in turn, what the exact nature of that development was. The alienating rift between Thomas and the hill farmers compounded a pre-existing, emotional isolation, which in turn fuelled his “disturbing muse”, further altering his technique; upon close examination, the poems reveal themselves as attempts to overcome estrangement. Thus, one’s focus must shift away from those shocking farmers, who are themselves largely poetic constructs anyway, and onto the Manafon poems themselves. As Patrick Crotty writes, “commentary on the Prytherch series has perhaps been particularly guilty of concern with subject matter at the expense of technique”,¹⁰ and the same can be said about general critical commentary on all the early poems (as it can indeed be said for the entire body of R. S. Thomas criticism).

Considering what we know of R. S. Thomas’s emotional unrest at Chirk and Hanmer, one might expect that the poet’s initial reaction upon arriving in Manafon would have been one of satisfaction and/or relief. After all, German bombs were no

⁸ Anne Stevenson, “The Uses of Prytherch”, *The Page’s Drift* 42.

⁹ “R. S. Thomas in Conversation with Molly Price-Owen” 100.

¹⁰ Patrick Crotty, “The Iago Prytherch Poems”, *Echoes to the Amen* 17. Crotty makes this observation to demonstrate his awareness of a problem, but Crotty himself does not go on to talk about style.

longer falling within earshot, and the longed-for Welsh hills were now under the rector's feet, not in the dreamy distance. And Thomas did, in fact, enjoy a moment of seeming respite from "the storm's hysteria" upon his arrival in Montgomeryshire. The following is a reflective prose passage from *The Echoes Return Slow*:

What had been blue shadows on a longed-for horizon, traced on an inherited background, were shown in time to contain this valley, this village and a church built with stones from the river, where the rectory stood, plangent as a mahogany piano. The stream was a bright tuning fork in the moonlight. (24)

But whatever respite Thomas enjoyed was short-lived. In fact, "plangent", while it can denote something strong and resounding, can also signify something sad and plaintive, even mournful, and, at its ending, the same passage "tunes" to a much bleaker note: "The young man was sent unprepared to expose his ignorance of life in a leafless pulpit". As Brown points out, there is a fascinating resonance between this mention of a "leafless pulpit" and lines from Thomas's much earlier poem "Hiraeth":¹¹

Autumn shakes out the thistle's curse
On the grey air, and my leafless house,
Picked clean by frost and rain,
Cowers naked upon the plain.

The dominant image in these lines conveys vulnerability: a naked house, stripped by the weather, with no leaves for covering. The *curse/house* rhyme, together with the sombre internal assonance of "grey air" instils the lines with gloomy tones, and the colour grey itself is drab and subdued in this context, reminding one of a line from *The Minister* (1953): "I looked out on a grey world, grey with despair" (SYT 91). The harsh, cracking "c" and "k" sounds in words like *picked*, *clean*, *cowers*, and *naked* magnify the harsh action of the frost upon the house, so that the register of the poem moves from muted to harsh. Moreover, by thus connecting the image of his "leafless pulpit" with that of his "leafless house", Thomas is associating his previously-existing feelings of personal

¹¹ Brown, R. S. *Thomas* 13.

estrangement to his newly-expanded vocation as a priest. Though a curate in Chirk and Hanmer, Thomas was a rector for the first time at Manafon, and he found himself emotionally unprepared to minister, alone, to a “tough, materialistic, hard-working people, who measured one another by the acre and by the pound”, and with whom he, a bourgeois outsider, had nothing in common (A 11):

I was brought up hard against this community and I really began to learn what human nature, rural human nature was like. And I must say that I found that nothing I'd been told or taught in theological college was of any help at all in these circumstances. It was just up to me to find my own way amongst these people.¹²

Perhaps the realities of Manafon would not have affected Thomas so much had he not been expecting something so very different, namely the idyllic, romantic vision of rural life that W. B. Yeats and Fiona Macleod had helped inspire in him, and that he had briefly glimpsed on his journey to Galway. Moreover,

The irony for Thomas was profound: here he felt *had* been a Welsh communal life [. . .]. But its last traces had all but slipped away before he could make contact with it; as he walked the empty hills he was, almost emblematically, still a lone outsider.¹³

This is not the first time the poet “became conscious of the conflict that exists between dream and reality” (A 11). We have already discussed the “unreal dreams” of Thomas’s “inner world” (A 44-5) and how World War II disrupted those dreams. But part of those dreams—the imagined existence of a “true” Welsh community (one that was Welsh-speaking with traditional, shared values) somewhere in the dreamy, distant west—had remained with the poet as something he could cling to in the storm’s disturbance. Here, then, was deeper irony: even as he moved westward, Thomas’s idyllic vision of Wales left him *emotionally* unprepared to accept the Welsh community that he was *physically* entering, one where economic pressures were driving the inhabitants from the land, forcing them

¹² Ormond, “R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet” 49.

¹³ Brown, *R. S. Thomas* 14.

to join “the modern world of the *déracinés*”.¹⁴ “Leave it, leave it” is the repeated refrain from Thomas’s poem “Depopulation of the Hills” (*AL* 14), which describes “these last survivors” as a people seemingly driven out by the land itself: “The grass / Wrecked them in its draughty tides”. Confronting this depopulated, lonely landscape, Thomas found inevitable disappointment and a deepening of his own pre-existing loneliness. The wound dealt to his communal vision hurt an already isolated Thomas and kept him “almost emblematically [. . .] a lone outsider”.

Once again, this placed Thomas in the emotional company of Edward Thomas, a poet who was fast becoming for R. S. Thomas a kindred spirit in estrangement. In fact, it is telling, albeit perhaps not surprising, that in his autobiography, R. S. Thomas selects a poem by Edward Thomas to describe his feelings about first arriving in Manafon (*A* 51). The following is from that poem, entitled “The New House”:

Now first, as I shut the door,
 I was alone
 In the new house; and the wind
 Began to moan.
 [.]

 Nights of storm, days of mist, without end;
 Sad days when the sun
 Shone in vain: old griefs and griefs
 Not yet begun.¹⁵

One notes that “The New House”, like “Hiraeth”, uses the image of a house set against harsh weather to convey feelings of loneliness. In fact, by breaking the poem’s second line between “alone” and the prepositional phrase “In the new house”, Edward Thomas places “I was alone” on its own line, thereby isolating the idea of isolation. Both the stormy, misty days and nights “without end” and the sun that “shone in vain” (here one

¹⁴ Brown, R. S. *Thomas* 14.

¹⁵ *Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems* 58-9.

recalls both R. S. Thomas's and Edward Thomas's birds that sing "in vain")¹⁶ contribute to a feeling of despondency, perpetual gloominess, and repetition, as do the long, low vowels in the rhyme *alone/moan*. The speaker's "old griefs" come into a present which itself merely looks forward to future days of "griefs / Not yet begun", and the *sun/begun* rhyme reinforces the idea of more grievous days ahead. By choosing this poem to represent his emotional state upon arriving in Manafon, R. S. Thomas reveals the very real isolation, even hopelessness he felt when the passionately dreamt-of Welsh hills disappointed his anticipations.

But the loneliness of Manafon did more for R. S. Thomas than deepen his emotional connection with Edward Thomas. Indeed, one senses that it was, in fact, R. S. Thomas's loneliness, his disappointment at the realities of life in Manafon, that led, at least in part, to the creation of his most famous character, Iago Prytherch, one who in his own poetic world is likewise deracinated from communal life, and who is himself an emblematic, lonely figure on a Welsh hill. Indeed, one senses that it was in the creation of Prytherch, a character forged in loneliness, that R. S. Thomas effectively reached the first destination of many along his poetic journey.¹⁷

This is Your Prototype

Yet this is your prototype, who, season by season
 Against siege of rain and the wind's attrition,
 Preserves his stock, an impregnable fortress
 Not to be stormed even in death's confusion.
 ("A Peasant" SYT 21)

¹⁶ In Edward Thomas's "Good-Night" (*Poems and Last Poems* 57), "Thrushes and blackbirds sing in the gardens of the town / In vain", and in R. S. Thomas's "Cynddylan On a Tractor" (*AL* 16), "all the birds are singing, bills wide in vain".

¹⁷ Again one is reminded of *Destinations* (1985), which picks up this idea of being a perpetual traveler, of arriving and setting off again. This idea of a progressive journey is also central to Byron Rogers' biography of R. S. Thomas, *The Man Who Went Into the West*.

The word “storm”, as both noun and verb, appears in several poems by R. S. Thomas. Particularly when viewed in light of one another, these “storms” reveal themselves to be linguistic, and oftentimes metaphoric, manifestations of the poet’s own “disturbing muse”. One cannot, of course, assume that the speaker of a given poem is always Thomas himself, but R. S. Thomas is usually not far from the poetic voices he creates, and those voices that are not strictly his own are, more often than not, alter egos for his own voice, part of a dialogue that is steeped in conflict and contradiction. As they evolve over the years, these voices—both the poet’s own and those he adopts—increase in degree of dissonance. Whereas the “storminess” of Thomas’s poetry begins in large measure as a reaction to an *external*, non-poetic force—one recalls “the storm’s hysteria”, the chaos of war that affected Thomas and his style in the early 1940s—the fury of those storms quickly becomes part of his own “furious interiors” (“Probing” *LS* 23).¹⁸

Therefore, when Thomas writes years later of “storming” at God, even “as Job stormed, with the eloquence / of the abused heart” (“At It” *F* 15), we recognize that “storming” as a force that has come full circle: now it is an *internal* conflict moving outward, with all the intensity of Job’s anguished cries into the whirlwind. Indeed, the book of Job, generally speaking, is about a man whose inner life is ripped apart by external forces, a man whose patience and faith are tried in the midst of those forces. And as with Job, storms surrounding R. S. Thomas become a metaphor for his own interior struggles. Indeed, the interplay between the landscape and the human interior is what seems to have attracted R. S. Thomas to Job. Making reference to a Welsh landscape, where one may hear “the hushed speech of wind and star/ In the deep-throated fir”, Thomas writes, “Was not this the voice that lulled / Job’s seething mind to a still calm, / yet tossed his heart to the racked world?” (“The Question” *SF* 15). No wonder, then, that

¹⁸ Considering that it was German air raids that first shocked R. S. Thomas and administered the jolt of war, the verb “storm” cannot fully be separated from the idea of a Nazi storm trooper or the idea of the blitzkrieg (literally “lightning war”) so that Iago Prytherch, who is “not to be stormed”, is also “impregnable” to the very “storms” that had so recently shaken R. S. Thomas.

when asked to name his favourite book from the Bible, R. S. Thomas responded, “I certainly like Job—Job is a very grand conception”.¹⁹

It is thus both fitting and ironic that R. S. Thomas uses a line from the Book of Job to introduce us to his first volume, *The Stones of the Field*, where we first encounter the *antithesis* of internal conflict: Iago Prytherch, Welsh hill farmer. Indeed, the so-called “Prytherch poems” are the beginning of the above-mentioned dialogue of conflicting voices. Again, this is not because of R. S. Thomas’s own “love-hate” reactions to actual hill farmers, but because Prytherch the poetic construct—rising as he does out of R. S. Thomas’s own inner-conflict—is himself a character of contradiction, one that M. Wynn Thomas has called “the very essence of enigma”.²⁰ Although he at times appears as a simple-minded muck-trudger (an image that too many critics have used to emblemize Thomas’s poetry, and Wales, as a whole), Iago cannot be called simplistic. He may unblinkingly follow the footsteps of his progenitors, yet that very ability, born of *durability*, to survive both “the attrition of the elements” and “the colonizing gaze of human observers”,²¹ means that unlike R. S. Thomas, Iago Prytherch *has* no “disturbing muse”. This makes him an “impregnable fortress” and his position, at least in this sense, is an enviable one; external storms cannot penetrate to affect his inner world.

“A Peasant”, the poem in which Prytherch first appears, is Thomas’s best-known and his most frequently anthologized. More critical ink has been devoted to its subject than to any other of R. S. Thomas’s poetic entities (including the later, equally enigmatic entity of God, whose presence—or absence, as the case often is—in the poems is ultimately much more sustained than Prytherch’s). In the beginning there were practical reasons for this: Prytherch appeared and reappeared in each of Thomas’s volumes of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, thus mandating sustained critical attention. However, Prytherch

¹⁹ “R. S. Thomas in Conversation with Molly Price-Owen” 99.

²⁰ M. Wynn Thomas, “Reviewing R. S. Thomas” 6.

²¹ M. Wynn Thomas, “For Wales See Landscape” 21-45.

remained (indeed, still remains) a favourite topic for critics long after Thomas had buried him and moved on to other thematic and stylistic endeavours. To a degree, this is understandable. The persona who helped establish Thomas's reputation has become closely identified with him. But that sustained association has resulted in a critically-muddled relationship between the poet and the persona, with many critics "insisting as they do on still seeing [Thomas] in the spitting image of the phlegmatic Iago Prytherch".²² Crotty has even pointed out a favourite pastime of some critics: analyzing the evolving relationship between R. S. Thomas and Iago Prytherch as if they were genuine acquaintances, with the purpose of determining how "the two of them [are] getting along". But, as Crotty reminds us, this "extra-textual pursuit" of Prytherchian themes has taken us too far from the poems themselves, for "Prytherch is a literary creation, rather than a person".²³ And, strangely, for all the attention it has received, "A Peasant" has hardly been evaluated on its most basic level: as a poem. That is, "A Peasant" is first and foremost a prosodic and linguistic creation, not a portrait of a man or a short sketch about Welsh upland farm life. And if "A Peasant" is indeed, as Crotty asserts, "Thomas's 'breakthrough' poem, the first to sound his characteristic tonalities", what we might call a "prototype" of a "Manafon style",²⁴ then it is not only imperative that the poem be evaluated on a textual level, but also requisite that one endeavour to establish just what Thomas's "characteristic tonalities" are.

A Peasant

Iago Prytherch his name, though, be it allowed
 Just an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills,
 Who pens a few sheep in a gap of cloud.
 Docking mangels, chipping the green skin
 From the yellow bones with a half-witted grin
 Of satisfaction, or churning the crude earth
 To a stiff sea of clods that glint in the wind—

²² M. Wynn Thomas, "Reviewing R. S. Thomas" 6.

²³ Crotty, "The Iago Prytherch Poems" 18.

²⁴ Ibid. 19. These "tonalities" are perhaps better described as being "characteristic" of Thomas's Manafon style, not his style in general.

So are his days spent, his spittled mirth
 Rarer than the sun that cracks the cheeks
 Of the gaunt sky perhaps once in a week,
 And then at night see him fixed in his chair
 Motionless, except when he leans to gob in the fire.
 There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind.
 His clothes, sour with years of sweat
 And animal contact, shock the refined,
 But affected, sense with their stark naturalness.
 Yet this is your prototype, who, season by season
 Against siege of rain and the wind's attrition,
 Preserves his stock, an impregnable fortress
 Not to be stormed even in death's confusion.
 Remember him, then, for he, too, is a winner of wars,
 Enduring like a tree under the curious stars.

The rhythmic pulse of "A Peasant" is determined by the way Thomas manipulates stress patterns. In analyzing the poem, Justin Wintle briefly refers to this as Thomas's "contrapuntal control of rhythm".²⁵ Although this description is somewhat vague, it is indeed rhythmic control, and more precisely the arrangement of stressed syllables, that is the most fundamental element of Thomas's "Manafon style". In the last chapter, we discussed Thomas's movement away from accentual-syllabic prosody and toward a more accentual, non-metrical prosody, where the number of accents per line remains relatively consistent ("A Peasant" uses both four and five-stress lines) and where the exact placement of those accented syllables varies from line to line. Indeed, the accented syllables are flexible, able to be placed anywhere in a given line, so that Thomas can arrange them to coincide with elements of thematic or imagistic significance. The effect of this is that stressed, or accented, elements—that is, words in which accented syllables fall—rise from the lines, like buoys on swelling waves, while the remaining words flow beneath them and between them to fill in the gaps. In contrast to metrical verse, where stressed syllables are spread evenly within a line, dictated by number, and only varied by metrical substitution, R. S. Thomas's non-metrical stress patterns are quite idiosyncratic. In this, he is quite similar to Hopkins, who "broke down traditional metric by

²⁵ *Furious Interiors: Wales, R.S. Thomas and God* (London: Harper Collins, 1996) 184.

counterpointing and intruding upon it lines built on strong-stress principles".²⁶ Thomas will occasionally write a metrically-regular line in his Manafon poems, but these are rare. In fact, despite his propensity for end-rhyme, his irregular stress patterns make his Manafon prosody closer to free verse than metrical verse.

We might call this stress technique "underscoring" or "accentuation" because of the way Thomas uses stress to call the reader's attention to particular words. In an early review of Thomas's poetry, Cecil Price argues that "[Thomas's] language can be colloquial to the point of flatness; but, suddenly, his thought *thrusts up* two words that transmute the passage".²⁷ Although Thomas's Manafon work, with very few exceptions, does not approach "flatness" (his stress patterns see to that), it is certainly true that Thomas will "thrust up" words of particular significance. For example, in the line, "Just an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills", stress falls on the words "ordinary", "man", "bald", "Welsh", and "hills". Thus, stress underscores, on one hand, the ordinariness (which should be interpreted as regularity and normalcy as much as dullness) of the man Prytherch and, on the other hand, both the baldness (which is akin to barrenness, a bleak setting) and Welshness of the hills. These qualities become significant not only in "A Peasant", but in the whole poetic landscape of Thomas's early work. Indeed, we can see how in "A Peasant", Thomas uses stress to build the framework of a fictional world. Stressed syllables consistently fall upon nouns which denote physical and tangible elements from the setting, thus accentuating the tactile nature of the hills where Prytherch lives and works. These nouns include "sheep", "mangels", "skin", "bones", "earth", "chair", "fire", "clothes", "sweat", "animal", and "rain". By thus calling attention to tangible elements, Thomas gives the reader an experience of reading a poem

²⁶ Harvey Gross, *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry* 95. Of course Thomas arranges stresses quite differently than Hopkins; his stress rhythms do not often resemble Hopkins's sprung-rhythm.

²⁷ Cecil Price, "The Poetry of R.S. Thomas", *The Welsh Anvil* 4 (1952): 82, italics added. Price is seemingly equating a lack of metre with a colloquial speech pattern. In "A Peasant", for example, the syllable counts varies so widely, between 7 and 14 syllables per line, and the stress patterns are so varied, that the poem cannot be viewed as metrical.

which is “grounded” in a physical setting, so that the world of Prytherch is experienced primarily as a palpable and tactile one. Ward describes the early work in the following way:

Thomas’s early poetry proliferates with sets of clear evocations of fundamental and palpable entities: tree, rain, hill, sky, soil, river, fire, cup, animal, peasant, stone, flower, field, family, bread. They may gradually accrue into symbolic reference or general pattern, but what we primarily remember is their immediate, startling impact.²⁸

Again, these “clear evocations” make their “immediate, startling impact” primarily because of the way Thomas uses stress. When he writes a line like “And then at night see him fixed in his chair”, he heavily stresses the words “fixed” and “chair”, so that the reader is rhythmically fixed in the tangible chair as well, and the same technique is used in the line “Or churning the crude earth”, where the verb “churning” and the adjective-noun combination “crude earth” are stressed so that the reader is rhythmically digging, engaging with the tactile landscape. In fact, Thomas’s early work is by far his most elemental, full of wind, rain, fire, and especially earth, which often takes the form of mire and mud and muck. This elemental quality becomes important to the Manafon poems, which join man and soil to the point that at times they become almost indistinguishable:

His gaze is deep in the dark soil,
As are his feet. The soil is all;
His hands fondle it, and his bones
Are formed out of it with the swedes.
And if sometimes the knife errs,
Burying itself in the shocked flesh,
Then out of the wound the blood seeps home
To the warm soil from which it came.

(“Soil” *AL* 28)

Again we see Thomas following his pattern of stressing thematically significant words. In the line “His gaze is deep in the dark soil”, the words “gaze”, “deep”, “dark”, and “soil” are all emphasized, placing the reader’s attention, just like the farmer’s, deep in the soil.

²⁸ Ward, *The Poetry of R.S. Thomas*, 52. Ward also picks up on what we might call the linguistic heaviness, or the sonic self-consciousness, of the early work, arguing that in the Manafon poetry, “the poet’s speech is not inhibited, and by Thomas’s own later and invariably stringent standards not especially economic” (19).

And we once again see how the poem's palpable elements—soil, feet, hands, flesh, bones, etc—are underscored rhythmically. One also notes Thomas's preference for monosyllabic nouns (a preference that is evident throughout his early work), and these nouns are themselves elemental, the starkest rudiments of speech. Thus, the poem's diction further enhances its basic-ness. There is man, soil, blood, and bone; everything else is secondary.

In "Soil", we also see a related technique, one that Thomas uses frequently in the early work: the grouping of stressed syllables together in what we might call "stress pairings" or "stress clusters", such as "shocked flesh" and "blood seeps home". These grouped stresses typically include one or more adjectives, as in "dark soil", "shocked flesh", and "warm soil"; in fact, in his early work, Thomas is so fond of using "stress clusters" and adjective-noun combinations that he can at times use the technique to excess:

Long cloak to a lean land, the white flesh thaws thin,
And, bare as a sky, the wind-sucked bone shows blue;
The berried blood swells in the frosted vein,
The speckled eye hatches its silver brood
To bud with song the old, heart-echoing wood—
Such is the spring Time brings the body to.
("The Strange Spring" *SF* 26)

The alliteration in this poem seems excessive, as do the numbers of consecutive stresses at the end of the first two lines; "white flesh thaws thin" is four consecutive stresses, and "wind-sucked bone shows blue" is five. And when adjective-noun combinations are made so frequently and in such rapid succession—"lean land", "berried blood", "frosted vein", "speckled eye", "silver brood"—each individual image loses power. In this case, "berried blood", itself a lovely image, is placed on the same level as "lean land", a far less striking one, so that both appear to be little more than obvious exercises in alliteration. Indeed, the overuse of adjectives and stressed syllables stifles the poem, and the heavy rhythm makes what are meant to be gentle images, such as "speckled eye" and "silver

brood", seem too bold. Also, the self-conscious sonority of these lines perhaps reveals a faint echo of Dylan Thomas, or of Hopkins. All of these are possible reasons why Thomas did not collect the poem in *Song at the Year's Turning*.

In "A Peasant", these same techniques seem more refined, in part because the poem is longer and can accommodate more adjective-verb pairings, but mainly because those pairings are used more judiciously and to greater musical effect. Indeed, Thomas frequently arranges his stresses for lyric purposes. Critics like Price, who call his work "colloquial to the point of flatness", have perhaps drawn attention away from his lyricism, but R. S. Thomas is a much more aural poet than he has generally been given credit for, and this must be taken into account if we are to define his early "characteristic tonalities". For example, "green skin" is an off rhyme, and although "wind's attrition" and "half-witted grin", are pairings with perhaps too-obvious assonance, "crude earth" and "spittled mirth" are more subtle. These pairings slow the pace of the line, stand out from it, not only because of the stressed syllables but also because of their tonal relationship. Consonance is used to similar effect; "bald Welsh hills", for instance, stands out not merely for its succession of three monosyllabic words but for the way the letter "l" joins all three; similarly, "crack the cheeks" is heavy on "c" and "k" sounds, and "gaunt sky" is joined by the voiced velar plosives "g" and "k".

With the idea of music in mind, we can examine the register of "A Peasant", which can be divided into two parts. The first and larger of these parts, lines 1-15, is comprised mainly of Anglo-Saxon and monosyllabic words, and these words are connected by means of the above-mentioned stressed syllables. They are also joined by both internal and end rhyme, assonance, and consonance: "pens" "sheep" and "gap" are joined by the letter "p" as well as by assonance ("sheep" and "gap" are also a slant rhyme); "spent" and "spittled" are connected by the "sp" combination; "cracks", "cheeks", "gaunt", "sky", and "week" are all joined by the voiced velar plosives "g" and

“k”; and “sour”, “years”, and “sweat” are linked by “s” and “r” sounds. The result of this abundant assonance and consonance is a poem that seems, in these first fifteen lines, organic in nature. The words, and the world they create, seem interconnected.

However, “A Peasant” turns in line 16, where the word “affected” acts like a hinge in the register. After “affected”, the poem shifts from the interconnected monosyllables to a diction that includes more formal, multisyllabic, Latinate words, such as “prototype”, “attrition”, and “impregnable”. And the word “affected” is emphasized not only by stress but also by the break between lines 15 and 16: “shock the refined, / But affected, sense [. . .]”. That line break, coupled with the comma after “affected”, effectively isolates the word and makes the reader pause to consider its meaning. Whose “refined” sense is being “shocked”, the poet’s or the reader’s? And in what way is that response “affected”? In part, that “your” in “your prototype” belongs to the bourgeois reader, who is inveighed by the poet for being shocked by Iago, just as he himself had been shocked by the Manafon farmers. In this way, the invective is a kind of re-enactment, with the reader being put into a place previously occupied by the poet; moreover, the bourgeois reader, whose presumed superiority to Prytherch is reinforced by the poem’s first fifteen lines, is forced, at the poem’s “turn”, to re-examine his or her standing in relation to the “peasant”. But this “affected” response still belongs, at least in part, to R. S. Thomas himself, whose bourgeois, English upbringing at times causes him to denounce the hill farmers for their “scorn [. . .] / Of the refinements of art and mysteries of the Church” (“A Priest to his People” *SF* 29). In this sense, Thomas is acknowledging his own arrogance, and one might interpret “affected” as putting on false airs. The more formal, Latinate diction certainly coincides with such haughty pretence, so that the admission of pretentiousness is self-deprecating. But “affected” can also be interpreted to mean emotionally stirred. This “stirring” is partially an emotional discomfort, caused by the sight and smell of Iago, but there is also another kind of

“stirring”, as the poet is moved to admiration. Indeed, R. S. Thomas feels a marked measure of regard for his poetic construct, his sour, rank clothes and uncultured personal habits notwithstanding. One might even say that the formal diction in the poem’s second half is accompanied by a tone of defensiveness, a reproach to any reader whose high-brow intellectualism might dismiss Prytherch as “other”. Such reproaches certainly occur in other poems from *The Stones of the Field*, such as “Affinity” (20)—

Ransack your brainbox, pull out the drawers
That rot in your heart’s dust, and what have you to give
To enrich his spirit or the way he lives?

—and “The Airy Tomb” (42), which includes the reprimand, “And you, hypocrite reader, at ease in your chair, / Do not mock their conduct [. . .]”. In this sense, the line “this is your prototype” is intended to “affect” the reader and eradicate the difference between reader and poetic subject.

But beyond its possible meanings, “affected” changes the register of the poem, and the unifying lyricism that gave the poem a sense of wholeness and connectivity is eclipsed by cumbersome descriptions, such as “stark naturalness” and “impregnable fortress”. These unwieldy verbal pairings seem out of place in the otherwise organic register of the poem, and the result is a sense of confusion that is consistent with the reader’s confusion as he or she is forced to re-evaluate his or her standing in relation to Prytherch. This intentional formal confusion is also in harmony with the idea of “death’s confusion”, which is introduced in the poem’s second half. And one cannot help but further relate this “confusion” to the state of bewilderment in which R. S. Thomas found himself at Hanmer, where he experienced for the first time the shock of war. Indeed, one suspects that the martial diction we find after the poem’s “turn” is a response to the frenzy and disruption of war we discussed in the last chapter, as is Prytherch’s *non-violent* victory. In this vein, M. Wynn Thomas has pointed out how it was partially a “fear of the animal, that finds its very den has been disturbed, that perhaps led [R. S. Thomas] half

admiringly to associate the Manafon upland farmers with “The land’s patience and a tree’s / Knotted endurance” (“Peasant Greeting” *SF* 27).²⁹ But Prytherch, who endures “like a tree”, is more than a counterpoint to conflict or a means for Thomas to admire a Welshman’s staying power. He is also the means by which Thomas attempts to plant his *own* roots in the Welsh soil. Thomas is searching for permanence, and the idea of man being like a tree—living to an old age, rooted in the soil, re-emerging annually—seems to have appealed to him personally to the extent that he wrote several poems that feature, in varying degrees, this man/tree metaphor.³⁰ By creating a world where “man remains summer and winter through, / Rooting in vain beneath his dwindling acre” (*The Minister* *SYT* 91), the poet places himself among those “Clinging stubbornly to the proud tree / Of blood and birth” (“Welsh History” *AL* 23). And by using the above-mentioned technique of “rooting” the poem rhythmically in landscape and in palpable elements, Thomas is also reacting to the recent *uprooting* he himself experienced in Hanmer, where German bombs heightened his desire to move west.³¹ The bleak world of Manafon does not always feel orderly, and the style of the poetry isn’t metrically “near” in the manner of Thomas’s earlier, more derivative work, but the Manafon style is nonetheless a contrast to Thomas’s war-torn, fluctuating styles of the early 1940s, emphasizing permanence and endurance, something, it is crucial to note, R. S. Thomas was in search of at the time.

²⁹ M. Wynn Thomas, “R. S. Thomas: War Poet” 85.

³⁰ Poems with man/tree metaphors are ubiquitous, but in this early period they include: “A Labourer” (*SF* 8), “Frost” (*SF* 9), “A Thought From Nietzsche” (*SF* 13), “A Peasant” (*SF* 14), “Man and Tree” (*SF* 19), “The Mistress” (*SF* 21), “The Strange Spring” (*SF* 26), “Peasant Greeting” (*SF* 27), “An Old Man” (*SF* 36), “Evensong” (*SF* 47), “Song For Gwydion” (*AL* 9), “The Gap in the Hedge” (*AL* 15), “The Tree” (*AL* 18), “Soil” (*AL* 28), “Summer” (*AL* 30), “The Labourer” (*AL* 32), “The Minister” (*SYT* 75) and “Lament for Prytherch” (*SYT* 99). It is also interesting to note that by the end of *Song at the Year’s Turning*, we see this metaphoric union taking on religious significance in “In a Country Church” (*SYT* 114), which describes “a winter tree / Golden with fruit of a man’s body”.

³¹ Although the “wars” that Prytherch wins are partially, and most immediately, a response to World War II, Prytherch’s victory transcends the moment, stretching beyond the forays of modern warfare and becoming something more timeless, even heroic. With this in mind, Brown suggests that in the closing lines of “A Peasant” Thomas “shows signs of [his] reading of Welsh-language praise poetry in the traditional metres [...] thus underlining the fact of Iago’s heroism”. See “The Problems of Belonging” 168.

Though it has not been viewed in this way, the creation of Iago Prytherch should be seen, at least in part, as an early attempt by R. S. Thomas to define himself. This can perhaps be best understood by examining the word “prototype”. Critics have often interpreted “prototype” as meaning “typical example”, so that Prytherch simply becomes the common model for all other Manafon farmers. Ward, for example, calls Prytherch the prototype “of other, unnamed farmers” in the early work,³² and Elaine Shepherd writes that “Prytherch is a composite of the peasant farmers whom Thomas knew in his various ministries”.³³ Gwydion Thomas, the poet’s son, as he is discussing his experiences in Manafon, further reveals that “Prytherch is a sort of amalgam of the Wilson boys from the Ffnnant, the Llwyn Coppa boys and the feuding Darlington, along with all those figures up in the fields above New Mills and Adfa”.³⁴ One certainly does not wish to discount this. It seems clear that the traits of genuine farmers—or at least R. S. Thomas’s perceptions of their traits—frequently appear in the Manafon poems. Nevertheless, the Manafon poems cannot be reduced to what Byron Rogers calls “a gallery of portraits”.³⁵ As some poets and critics have observed, R. S. Thomas’s Wales is “largely unlocatable”.³⁶ It is “an inner world, an invention”, not “a faithful portrait of the country”.³⁷ In other words, “Considered as an approximation to, let alone an accurate report of, life in an upland rural community, the Prytherch poems are, as we all know, non-starters”.³⁸ In fact, “A Peasant” is better understood as the genesis of an internal dialogue, the beginning of Thomas’s journey towards “Welsh realization”, which is also the beginning of a search for self-definition. Indeed, “prototype” can be read, quite literally, as “first type” or “original type”, the earliest example of a group, species, or race,

³² Ward, *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas* 23.

³³ Elaine Shepherd, *R.S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence. Images of God Explored* (New York: St. Martins, 1996) 75.

³⁴ “Quietly as Snow: Gwydion Thomas Interviewed by Walford Davies”, *New Welsh Review* 64 (Spring 2004) 26.

³⁵ *The Man Who Went Into the West* 245.

³⁶ Robert Minninnick, “Living With R. S. Thomas” 12.

³⁷ Leslie Norris, “Letter to the Editor”, *Poetry Wales* 7.4 (1972): 120.

³⁸ M. Wynn Thomas, *Internal Difference: Twentieth-Century Writing in Wales* (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1992) 110.

and the basis or standard for what comes later (similar to an archetype). When “prototype” is read in this way, Prytherch becomes the embodiment of the original Welshman, the seeds from which future Welshmen—including R. S. Thomas—will grow, and the phrase “season by season”, with its agricultural connotation, enhances this meaning. “What have the centuries done / To change him?” Thomas asks in another poem, emphasizing the farmer’s seasonal constancy. “He has been here since life began, a vague / Movement among the roots of the young grass” (“The Labourer” *AL* 32). Thomas is not merely saying (rather crudely) to his reader, “This man is your stereotypical Welsh, upland farmer type” (though this is, unfortunately, how the line has most often been interpreted). Nor is he merely putting an “affected” reader in his or her place by holding up Prytherch as “the prototype of us all”³⁹ (though this is certainly part of his intention as well, for if Prytherch is the bourgeois *reader’s* prototype, he cannot easily be characterized as a rural stereotype). But R. S. Thomas is also admitting (even declaring) to himself, “this is *your* prototype”, or in other words, “This is what—and where—you come from”. R. S. Thomas, like the enigmatic Prytherch, was an estranged entity, one who was perpetually “lost in his own breath” (“Affinity” *SF* 20), searching for a “home” and, ultimately, an identity. In “A Peasant”, Thomas is attempting, perhaps even unconsciously, the attrition of his own root-less-ness by means of the entrenched Prytherch. He is creating, and adopting, a Welsh genealogy by crafting a Welsh mythology. Creation thus ushers in a process of self re-creation, the beginning of Thomas’s rejection of his bourgeois, English upbringing (“the refined, but affected sense”) and his recasting himself in the image of a Welshman. Prytherch, like Job, is “in league with the stones of the field”,⁴⁰ and R. S. Thomas, by declaring himself a descendant from such a prototype, is placing himself “in league” with the Welsh

³⁹ Crotty, “The Iago Prytherch Poems” 24.

⁴⁰ KJV Job 5:23: “For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee”.

landscape, seeking to give himself roots therein, hoping to ease his inner turmoil to a degree, including the turmoil so recently caused by war (“Remember him, then, for he, too, is a winner of wars”). In fact, one notes that the change in register and sense of confusion ushered in after the word “affected” is alleviated after the acceptance of Prytherch as a “prototype”, and in the final couplet, the register of the poem reclaims its organic properties: “winner of wars” brings back the consonance with “w” and “r” sounds, and the *wars/stars* rhyme gives the poem a sense of completeness, a kind of poetic calm after the earlier, confusing “storm”. Thus, the reaction to—and to some degree the acceptance of—Iago Prytherch is also a reaction to an emerging self, an “alternation between denunciation and self-recognition”.⁴¹ And because Prytherch is the means by which Thomas begins to shape his own Welshness, each of his well-known reproofs of Wales and the Welsh also becomes self-rebuke, “an act of national indictment that is itself grounded in self accusation: it is satire whose other face is confession”.⁴²

Thus, the creation of the mythological Prytherch, which is decidedly inspired by both Thomas’s “disturbing muse” and his *hiraeth* for Welshness, should also be seen as an early *stylistic* expression of these influences. And, not surprisingly, the Prytherch poems also act as further catalysts for that same *hiraeth*, and for Thomas’s newfound longing for Welsh identity. They allow him to move beyond his initial, somewhat stereotypical impressions of the Welsh as backwater hill sloggers and to see their struggle as both emblematic and personal. Manafon may not have fit the idyllic image of Wales the poet had created in his imagination (and to some degree in his earlier poems), but the resulting disappointment and loneliness did not destroy his belief in the importance of such a Wales, nor did it dim his growing desire to be identified as a Welsh, rather than an English poet. In fact, “A Peasant” is not only the beginning of Thomas’s self-reshaping

⁴¹ M. Wynn Thomas, “Reviewing R. S. Thomas” 6.

⁴² Ibid. 6.

as a Welshman; it is also the beginning of a poetic transformation, where Thomas attempts to recast his English-language poetry in the image of something more Welsh.

“A Peasant” is therefore very much a signpost as we trace Thomas’s stylistic development; it begins his “deliberate withdrawal from England (including the forms of English verse) and a correspondingly self-monitored identification with Wales and Welsh culture”.⁴³ In the above-mentioned 1947 broadcast, Thomas says,

But after moving from the Cheshire border further into Wales, I found that the character of a particular part of the earth was beginning to influence me. The enherent [sic] love of my own country was agitating for some embodiment in poetry. Hence there came poems such as ‘A Peasant’ where the landscape is not general but localized, and where a deliberately Welsh character is introduced in the person of Iago Prydderch [sic].⁴⁴

This “deliberately Welsh character”, that was “agitating for [. . .] embodiment in poetry” led Thomas to begin to infuse his poetry with Welsh subject matter, including the names of Welsh mythological figures, Welsh historical figures, Welsh landscapes, and Welsh place names. This process begins in *The Stones of the Field*, not only in “A Peasant”, which might be seen as “the prototype” of Thomas’s poetic “Cymrification”, but also in poems such as “The Rising of Glyndŵr” (17); “Night and Morning” (18), a translation from the Welsh; “Country Church” (24), which has as its subtitle “Manafon”; “Hiraeth” (34), which, as mentioned in the last chapter, evokes the legend of Ceridwen’s cauldron and the birth of Taliesin; and of course many other poems about Welsh hill farmers, both named and unnamed. Price picks up on this very self-conscious process of Cymrification, rightly observing that in the early work, the poet “is at pains [. . .] to emphasize his relationship with Welsh rather than English poetry”.⁴⁵

⁴³ Stevenson, “The Uses of Prytherch” 39.

⁴⁴ “The Poet’s Voice” 1-2. It is unknown whether the transcript of the broadcast was typed by R. S. Thomas or someone at the BBC, but considering the Welsh spelling of “Prydderch”, rather than the Anglicized version that appears in the actual poem, one surmises that the transcript was not typed by the poet himself. The typeface, which differs from manuscripts known to be typed by the poet, also suggests this.

⁴⁵ Price, “The Poetry of R. S. Thomas” 83-4.

Thomas initially attempts to “Cymrify” his poems primarily by changing his subject matter. More specifically, he focuses primarily on farmers and landscapes. As mentioned above, the prosodic techniques Thomas employs in *The Stones of the Field* are intended to stress the elemental nature of the Welsh hills and “root” the poems in palpable elements, particularly in the landscape itself. And, as we have just discussed, they are also a means for Thomas to give himself Welsh roots. But the poems in *An Acre of Land* (1952) expand this process of Cymrification to include stylistic changes as well. Thomas would eventually grow sceptical of the merits of such poetry, calling the concept of Welsh writing in English “nonsense”,⁴⁶ but in the mid-to-late 1940s and early 1950s, he experimented with a style of verse that, while written in English, was very much intended to be a kind of Welsh poetry. These poems became a way for R. S. Thomas, who had begun to refashion himself as a Welsh poet, to begin to speak out on the state of his country, and stylistically, the poems are intended to represent and embody the country’s condition.

A True Expression

Listen, listen. Where the river fastens
The trees together with a blue thread,
I hear the ousel of Cilgwri telling
The mournful story of the long dead.

Above the clatter of the broken water
The song is caught in the bare boughs;
The very air is veined with darkness, hearken!
The brown owl wakes in the woods now.

The owl, the ousel, and the toad carousing
In Cors Fochno of the old laws—
I hear them yet, but in what thicket cowers
Gwernabwy’s eagle with the sharp claws?
(“Wales” *AL* 8)

⁴⁶ “Probings” 29.

In the 1947 radio broadcast, “The Poet’s Voice”, R. S. Thomas introduces and reads from seven poems, and he does so with an agenda: to make a case for the possibility of a distinctively Welsh poetry in English, one whose purpose is to be “a true expression of our country in all its forms”. As an example of this type of poetry, Thomas points to the above poem, “Wales”, in which he argues he has “tried to convey the atmosphere of our land at the present time”. He points out that he has used “a great deal of falling assonance to suggest the tragedy of our position, and an occasional rising sound to suggest the faint gleams of hope which still come to us like sunlight on the mountainside”, and he asks the listener “to observe carefully the assonances referred to as well as the consonantal counterpointing”.⁴⁷

“Wales” does, in fact, include both falling and rising assonance. The first stanza begins with the short, high-register vowels “i”, “e”, and “a” in words like “listen”, “river”, “fastens”, “together”, and “thread”. Then the register shifts to include the longer, low-register vowels “o” and “u” in “ousel”, “mournful”, “story”, and “long”. The second stanza moves from a mix of mid-register and low-register vowels in “clatter”, “water”, “song”, “caught”, “very”, “air”, “veined”, “darkness”, and “hearken” to the very low vowels of “brown”, “owl”, “woods”, and “now”. The third stanza, however, begins with the same low-register sounds that ended the first two stanzas—“owl”, “ousel”, “toad”, “carousing”, “Cors Fochno”, and “old”—and moves to a combination of mid- and high-register vowels at the poem’s conclusion: “hear”, “yet”, “thicket”, “Gwernabwy”, and “eagle”. The vowel register of the poem therefore falls and then rises again. The poem’s assonance also ties words together, crossing lines and stanzas, so that vowel sounds that are left eventually get picked up again (*listen, river, Cilgwri* and *thicket* assonate, as do *ousel, boughs, brown, owl, carousing* and *cowers*). Some of this assonance even reaches the point of internal rhyme, and this places the ear’s focus on vowel sounds

⁴⁷ “The Poet’s Voice” 4.

(*chatter/water, bare/air*). Additionally, the poem's end-rhyme, while occasionally exact (*thread/dead, laws/claws*) is mainly vowel-rhyme, and this technique draws attention typically given to end-rhyme back into the middle of the line, thus further enhancing the ear's focus on vowel sounds. In essence, Thomas has written a poem whose assonance is its chief characteristic; it is through the manipulation of vowel sounds that he is attempting to convey his vision of "the atmosphere of [Wales] at the present time".

That atmosphere is one of lost innocence. Again, the falling assonance in "Wales" is intended "to suggest the tragedy of [the Welsh] position". In the last chapter we discussed how a shadow of lost innocence casts itself on much of R. S. Thomas's writing, and in the Manafon period, that feeling of loss is very much tied up in Wales itself, which Thomas eventually comes to view as having lost its ancient splendour. In Manafon, "the conflict that exists between dream and reality" (A 11) became the heart of Thomas's "disturbing muse". On one hand, Thomas is committed to "sing[ing] the land's praises", but on the other hand, he senses the onset of a "leprous frost" ("Memories" AL 38). The creatures in "Wales", for example, simultaneously reflect Thomas's desire to incorporate Welsh subject matter *and* his belief in the lost majesty of Wales. The creatures come from *The Mabinogion*, the story of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, and they are four of the six oldest of all creatures (the other two, the Salmon of Llyn Lliffon and the Stag of Rhedynfre, appear in "The Ancients of the World" [AL 13], a poem with very similar patterns of assonance, which Thomas also reads in the 1947 broadcast, pointing out how the poem's assonance is achieved by "rhyming English vowel sounds with Welsh ones").⁴⁸ The speaker of "Wales" hears the ousel telling "the mournful story of the long dead" (one is reminded of Edward Thomas's "The Unknown Bird" and the way both Thomases use birds in haunting, mournful ways). But the part of the story of Culhwch and Olwen from which Thomas takes his characters itself has a mournful tone.

⁴⁸ "The Poet's Voice" 3.

In the tale, Arthur sends an embassy in search of Mabon, the son of Modron, and along the way the embassy encounters various animals, each of which leads the group to another animal who, in turn, tells of its long years residing in the same place and of the sad transformation and decay that has transpired with the passing of time. For example, the Ousel of Cilgwri says,

When I first came here, there was a smith's anvil in this place, and I was then a young bird; and from that time no work has been done upon it, save the pecking of my beak every evening, and now there is not so much as the size of a nut remaining thereof [. . .]⁴⁹

And the Stag of Redynvre says,

When first I came hither, there was a plain all around me, without any trees save one oak sapling, which grew up to be an oak with an hundred branches. And that oak has since perished, so that now nothing remains of it but the withered stump [. . .]⁵⁰

And the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd says,

When first I came hither, the wide valley you see was a wooded glen. And a race of men came and rooted it up. And there grew there a second wood; and this wood is the third. My wings, are they not withered stumps?⁵¹

And the Eagle of Gwern Abwy says,

I have been here for a great space of time, and when I first came hither there was a rock here, from the top of which I pecked at the stars every evening, and now it is not so much as a span high. From that day to this I have been here, and I have never heard of the man for whom you inquire, except once when I went in search of food as far as Llyn Llyw. And when I came there, I struck my talons into a salmon, thinking he would serve me as food for a long time. But he drew me into the deep, and I was scarcely able to escape from him.⁵²

And, finally, the Salmon of Llyn Llyw says,

As much as I know I will tell thee. With every tide I go along the river upwards, until I come near to the walls of Gloucester, and there have I found such wrong as I never found elsewhere [. . .]⁵³

⁴⁹ *The Mabinogion*, trans. Lady Charlotte Guest (Chicago: Academy Press, 1978) 246.

⁵⁰ *The Mabinogion* 247.

⁵¹ *The Mabinogion* 247.

⁵² *The Mabinogion* 247.

⁵³ *The Mabinogion* 248.

Reading these excerpts from the *Mabinogion*, one quickly picks up on a tone of decay and diminishment. The smith's anvil has long since been unused and has been reduced to the size of a nut. The oak tree has been reduced to "a withered stump". A race of men has "rooted up" the wooded glen (one is again reminded of Thomas's own uprooting), and the owl's wings, like the oak tree, are "withered stumps". The great rock that almost reached the stars has been reduced to a "span high". Much of the blame for this decay is given to men, who are full of "such wrong as [the salmon has] never found elsewhere".

All of this decay, of course, is consistent with Thomas's portrayal of the Montgomeryshire hill country in *An Acre of Land*:

Too far for you to see
 The fluke and the foot-rot and the fat maggot
 Gnawing the skin from the small bones,
 The sheep are grazing at Bwlch-y-Fedwen,
 Arranged romantically in the usual manner,
 On a bleak background of bald stone.

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

("The Welsh Hill Country" *AL* 7)

The elements of decay are emphasized by heavy alliteration (*fluke, foot-rot, fat, moss, mould, cold chimneys, cracked, bleak background, bald*) as well as the aforementioned "stress pairings" ("fat maggot", "small bones", "bald stone", "cracked doors"). However, the poem does slightly more than wallow in cracks and mould and foot-rot. The "sunlight" that makes its appearance in the "bleak" setting introduces a brighter image, reminding one of what Thomas, in "The Poet's Voice", describes as "the faint gleams of hope which still come to us like sunlight on the mountainside", and bringing to mind one of Thomas's most striking descriptions of the Welsh dichotomy: "Is there blessing? Light's peculiar grace / In cold splendour robes this tortured place / For strange marriage" ("Song at the Year's

Turning" *SYT* 101). Likewise, the speaker in Thomas's "Wales" introduces a tone of hope when he wonders where the majestic eagle might still be cowering with its "sharp claws". Overall, there is a tone of despondency and nostalgia in both poems for a lost, ancient splendour, but there is also a suggestion that that splendour might return.

Gwernabwy's eagle is not finally gone. And with the allusion to the battle between the eagle and the salmon, one is reminded of those earlier lines from "The Bat"—"And now when every spectral hour / Is mindful of the ancient wars"—and of those "battles of the past" that Thomas used to dream of as he sat on the Holyhead train and gazed at the sky, believing that the ancient, majestic Wales still existed somewhere in the west. Thomas is beginning to realize that fixating on the past may amount to "gnawing the bones / of a dead culture", but he retains the hope that a Welsh people who were "taut for war" and "bred on legends" may yet "arise / and greet each other in a new dawn" ("Welsh History" *AL* 23).

It is worth mentioning here that while Thomas's attempts at writing a decidedly Welsh poetry in English were influenced by Welsh mythology and history, they were also heavily-influenced by the post-war literary scene in Wales. As the war began to draw to a close, the periodical *Wales* was restarted, edited by Keidrych Rhys and publishing the work of Dylan Thomas, Vernon Watkins, Glyn Jones, and Alun Lewis, among others. In fact, as mentioned in the last chapter, *Wales* was the first Welsh journal to publish individual poems by Thomas, and it was in that journal, where Welshness and Anglo-Welshness were the subjects of lively debate, that Thomas published many of his opinions on Welsh literature and the Welsh situation. Indeed, it was while reading this periodical, where "the emphasis was on Welsh-ness", that Thomas resolved that "he, too, had to show he was a Welshman by using names that could not possibly be English ones" (*A* 54). But the "Cymrification" of Thomas's poetry went beyond the simple and superficial adornments of Welsh words. Many of the prosodic elements that Thomas

introduced (rather self-consciously, it must be admitted) into his early, post-war poems were in fact derived from elements of Welsh *cynganedd* (literally “harmony”), a Welsh prosody built on consonantal patterning and both internal and end-rhyme. Although *cynganedd* is strict-metre poetry written in Welsh, some of its sonic properties had already been incorporated by several of Thomas’s English-language contemporaries, among them Leslie Norris, Alun Lewis, and Glyn Jones. And it is with this heavily-influential period in mind that Ned Thomas shrewdly points out the following to R.S. Thomas in a 1990 interview:

[. . .] it seems that in the early postwar period you took a more hopeful view of another kind of Anglo-Welsh possibility: that there could be a Welsh literature in English, strongly grounded in a knowledge of Welsh history, language, and literary tradition. What MacDiarmid had done for Scotland and Yeats had done for Ireland could be done for Wales by writers who properly equipped themselves.⁵⁴

For R. S. Thomas, “properly equip[ping] himself” meant studying Welsh history and mythology to the point where he could reference them in his poems, and it also meant studying the Welsh language and its poetic tradition to the point where he could incorporate some of the elements of *cynganedd*. These were not passive endeavours. In the 1947 radio broadcast, for example, Thomas points to his use of “*characteristically Welsh* internal rhyme and alliteration”,⁵⁵ and as an example, he reads the uncollected poem “Hill Farmer”:

And he will go home from the fair
 To dream of the grey mare with the broad belly,
 And the bull and the prize tup
 That holds its head so proudly up.
 He will go back to the bare acres
 Of caked earth, and the reality
 Of fields that yield such scant return
 Of parched clover and green corn.
 Yes, he will go home to the cow gone dry,
 And the lean fowls and the pig in the sty,
 And all the extravagance of a Welsh sky.

⁵⁴ “Probings” 28.

⁵⁵ “The Poet’s Voice” 2, italics added.

While not written in any of the Welsh metres, “Hill Farmer” is indeed full of techniques that are used in traditional Welsh-language prosody: internal rhyme, assonance, consonance, and alliteration. These are, of course, features which can be used in traditional English prosody, but they are requirements of Welsh prosody, and Thomas’s use of alliteration, vowel harmony, and stress patterns is clearly an attempt to evoke Welsh-language poetry. It can be seen as a sincere, if overwrought, stylistic example of what Thomas would later call “strutting and beating my chest and saying ‘I am Welsh’” (*JP* 85). One initially notices several examples of the above-mentioned “stress pairings” and “stress clusters” which, again, most often take in adjectives for lyric purposes: “grey mare” is an example of both assonance and a shared “r”; “broad belly” alliterates with the plosive “b”; both words in “prize tup” have a “p”; all three words in “cow gone dry” have long, open vowels (and the three consecutive monosyllables remind one of “bald Welsh hills”); “lean fowls” alliterates with the “l”. But the words reach beyond their particular stress pairings so that the sounds build on each other. “Bare acres”, for example, is similar to, and recalls, “grey mare” because of its assonance and its repeated “r”; “green corn” builds on this as well; in addition to the shared “r”, the pairing makes use of a shared “n” and is nearly an internal rhyme.

A related technique is the way Thomas uses assonance so that the vowel sound of a particular line’s terminal word is often picked up in the middle of the following line. For example, “fair” at the end of line one assonates with both “grey” and “mare” in line two; “acres” at the end of line five shares exact vowel sounds with “caked earth” in line six; and the word “reality” at the end of line six assonates with both “fields” and “yield” in line seven. The Irish poet Austin Clarke, an early influence on Thomas, describes this technique in the following way:

Assonance, more elaborate in Gaelic than in Spanish poetry, takes the clapper from the bell of rhyme. In simple patterns, the tonic word at the

end of the line is supported by a vowel rhyme in the middle of the next line.⁵⁶

In fact, while Thomas's serious study of Welsh in Manafon certainly gave him some exposure to the techniques of *cynghanedd*, and while his reading of Keidrych Rhys's *Wales* exposed him to other English-language writers who had been influenced by Welsh-language poetry, R. S. Thomas, in his desire to write what he viewed as characteristically Welsh poetry, also looked to Ireland to find examples of English-language poems with non-English prosodies.

In particular, Thomas responded to the work of Clarke, who "subtly introduces the problems and concerns of modern Ireland [. . .] by a technically dazzling manipulation of English poetry".⁵⁷ According to Crotty, Austin Clarke's "prosodic innovations—his efforts to develop what his mentor Thomas MacDonagh called 'an Irish mode'—link him both to the cultural nationalism of the Literary Revival and the modernist localism of William Carlos Williams and Hugh MacDiarmid".⁵⁸ And with the idea of cultural nationalism in mind, it is interesting to note that in 1939, at the same time R. S. Thomas was publishing in *The Dublin Magazine*, Clarke was arguing in that same magazine that "the verbal and poetic associations of the English language belong to a different culture".⁵⁹ Indeed, Thomas's own cultural nationalism was surfacing at this same time, and he responded enthusiastically to the idea of an English-language poetry based in a non-English tradition. Like Clarke in Ireland, Thomas sought to address the problems and concerns of modern Wales by means of prosodic innovation. In the 1947 broadcast, Thomas remarks that "the work of poets like Austin Clarke in Ireland has interested me, for he has shown how much of the atmosphere of old Irish verse can be

⁵⁶ *The Collected Poems of Austin Clarke*, ed. Liam Miller (London: Oxford UP, 1974) 547.

⁵⁷ G. Craig Tapping, *Austin Clarke: A Study of His Writings* (Dublin: Academy Press, 1981) 50.

⁵⁸ Patrick Crotty, ed. *Modern Irish Poetry* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1995) 13.

⁵⁹ "The Black Church", *The Dublin Magazine* (Oct.-Dec. 1939): 13.

brought into English by skilful counterpointing”.⁶⁰ And the following year, Thomas made these remarks in the pages of *Wales*, where so much of the post-war literary debate about Anglo-Welsh literature was taking place:

In the past Wales beyond Offa’s Dyke or beyond the circle of the Norman castle was always left in charge of the heather, *y grug*. The modern illusion is to treat the heather, or *cefn gwlad* as backwater. [. . .] But Austin Clarke has shown that if one is willing to become acquainted with the Irish literary tradition, there is no need to consider oneself in a backwater of literature, and the same applies to Scotland and Wales. We have no need to migrate to London to have the strings of our tongues unloosed.⁶¹

For Thomas, who was attempting to distance himself from his English upbringing and re-define himself as a Welshman, but who was also, because of that same upbringing, unable to write poetry in Welsh, Austin Clarke was an exemplar. Here was a poet who had become familiar enough with his country’s indigenous, non-English poetic tradition to be able to celebrate that tradition through the medium of English-language poetry. In particular, Clarke turned to the assonance and internal rhyme of Gaelic prosody, and Thomas was drawn to these elements of Clarke’s work. In a much later interview with Molly Price-Owen, Thomas commented:

When I was younger, learning to write seriously, I was quite influenced by the Irish poets, people like Austin Clark [sic] and he, I suppose with a knowledge of Irish, he was very keen on assonance and dissonance and I pursued several poems pursuing the same theme – the ancients of the world [sic]. It was vowel technique, and vowel sounds appealed to me at that time [. . .].⁶²

In the following Austin Clarke poem, “The Lost Heifer”, one can easily see examples of both the “skilful counterpointing” and “vowel technique” that Thomas observed and responded to in Clarke’s poetry:

⁶⁰ “The Poet’s Voice” 3. Thomas makes similar comments about the Scottish poet Adam Drinam in “Some Contemporary Scottish Writing”, where he writes that “[Adam] Drinam’s greatest achievement as far as I am concerned is his success in conveying an unmistakably Scottish atmosphere by means of the English tongue. I cannot yet see how we Welsh poets writing in English are to surmount the fact that much of our environment bears names which are irreducible to English [. . .] but a man like Drinam shows us how to begin” (SP 28).

⁶¹ R. S. Thomas, “A View of the Scottish Renaissance”, *Wales* Vol. VIII, No. 30 (Nov. 1948): 602.

⁶² “R. S. Thomas in Conversation with Molly Price-Owen” 99.

When the black herds of rain were grazing
 In the gap of the pure cold wind
 And the watery hazes of the hazel
 Brought her into my mind,
 I thought of the last honey by the water
 That no hive can find.

Brightness was drenching through the branches
 When she wandered again,
 Turning the silver out of dark grasses
 Where the skylark had lain,
 And her voice coming softly over the meadow
 Was the mist becoming rain.⁶³

There are several techniques in these stanzas that one can find in Thomas's Manafon poems. For example, the way Clarke uses adjective-noun combinations to form "stress pairings" and "stress clusters" is something to which Thomas seems to have responded. Pairings like "black herds" and "dark grasses" might easily be found in almost any poem from the Manafon period, and Clarke's rhythmic phrases are at times extremely similar to Thomas's. For example, "gap of the pure cold wind" has the exact rhythm of Thomas's "man of the bald Welsh hills". Both are phrased so that two consecutive unstressed syllables, "of the", set up three consecutive stressed monosyllables, the first two of which fall upon adjectives ("bald Welsh hills"; "pure cold wind"). In both cases the three words begin with consonants rather than vowels, a technique that slows the reading of the line and separates each stressed word, accentuating its force. In Clarke's case the stress cluster is also slowed by long, open vowels, and in Thomas's case it is slowed by a liquid "l" in each of the three words. And, in a similar manner to that which we saw in Thomas's "Wales" and "Hill Farmer", assonance and consonance in "The Lost Heifer" link words within lines, between lines, and across stanzas. In terms of assonance, the long "a" in *rain*, *grazing*, *hazes*, *hazel*, *lain*, and *rain* ties the poem's stanzas together sonically. "Brightness" and "drenching" share a short "e" (the first unstressed, the latter stressed), and "drenching" and "branches" are, apart from their endings, extremely similar. In

⁶³ *The Collected Poems of Austin Clarke* 126.

terms of consonance, the liquid “l” in *black, cold, hazel, last, silver, skylark*, and *lain* runs like a thread throughout the poem, and the ubiquitous “r”, for its part, holds the first four lines of the second stanza together in *brightness, drenching, branches, wandered, turning, silver, dark, grasses, where*, and *skylark*. Of course when compared with “A Peasant”, “The Lost Heifer” is a gentler poem, describing a gentler landscape. Thomas’s poem is sharper, harsher, more monosyllabic, with less liquid “l” sounds and less longer, open vowels. But the point to be made here is that Clarke’s techniques appealed to R. S. Thomas, who responded by using some of the same techniques in his own poetry, as we will examine further.

Another characteristic of Clarke’s poetry (particularly his earlier poetry) is the way he uses end-rhyme, often rhyming monosyllabic words with longer words and rhythmically-stressed words with unstressed words, as in the following stanzas from “The Scholar”:

Paying no dues to the parish,
He argues in logic
And has no care of cattle
But a satchel and stick.

The showery airs grow softer,
He profits from his ploughland
For the share of the schoolmen
Is a pen in hand.⁶⁴

One initially notices a great deal of alliteration, which links words within a given line, usually a word near the beginning of the line with the line’s final word: *paying/parish, care/cattle, satchel/stick, showery/softer, profits/ploughland, share/schoolmen*. Less immediately apparent, however, is that Clarke rhymes the unstressed syllable of “logic” with the stressed “stick”, and he also rhymes the unstressed syllable of “ploughland” with the

⁶⁴ *The Collected Poems of Austin Clarke* 162.

stressed “hand”.⁶⁵ And, as in Thomas’s “Hill Farmer”, we see how Clarke picks up the vowel sound of a particular line’s terminal word in the middle of the following line: “cattle” assonates with “satchel”, “softer” assonates with “profits”, and “schoolmen” both assonates and rhymes with “pen”. We find similar techniques in R. S. Thomas’s poem “Song”, which appeared in *The Dublin Magazine*. In fact, in the 1947 broadcast, Thomas points to Clarke as being “responsible” for the poem and is at pains to point out its “strangely un-English sound”:

Up in the high field’s silence where
The air is rarer, who dare break
The seamless garment of the wind
That wraps the bareness of his mind?

The white sun spills about his feet
A pool of darkness, sweet and cool,
And mildly at its mournful brink
The creatures of the wild are drinking.

Tread softly, then, or slowly pass,
And leave him rooted in the grasses;
The earth’s unchanging voices teach
A wiser speech than gave you birth.⁶⁶

Like Clarke in “The Scholar”, Thomas rhymes monosyllabic words with longer words: “brink” rhymes with the first syllable of “drinking”, and “pass” rhymes with the first syllable of “grasses”. And also like Clarke, Thomas uses the technique of picking up the vowel sound of a line’s terminal word in the middle of the following line: “where” assonates and rhymes with “air” and “rarer”, and “teach” rhymes with “speech”; similarly, Thomas picks up the vowel sound of “earth’s” at the end of the last line with “birth”, also creating an internal rhyme; additionally, “cool” rhymes with “pool”, a word from earlier in the same line. There is also a great deal of consonance in the lines, and one notes the use of the aforementioned “stress clusters” formed by adjective-noun

⁶⁵ The specific technique of rhyming an unstressed syllable with a stressed syllable is also something Thomas would have encountered in his exposure to Welsh-language poetry, not exclusively in the work of Clarke.

⁶⁶ *The Dublin Magazine* (Jan.-March 1948): 3.

combinations in “high field’s silence” and “white sun spills” (we also find yet another example of the poetic subject being “rooted” in the landscape, which, as we have already discussed, is extremely important to Thomas during the Manafon period). Thus, the poem’s techniques, although not identical to Clarke’s, are clearly influenced by his prosody.

“Song” can also be seen as both a Romantic and anti-Romantic lyric. The idea that “the earth’s unchanging voices” are heard in “the high field’s silence, where / the air is rarer” is certainly a Romantic one, reminding one of Thomas’s early Georgian models but also the work of the Lake School poets, whose work Thomas encountered in *The Golden Treasury*. However, one recalls that in the preface to the 1800 Lyrical Ballads, which is probably the closest thing we have to a Romantic manifesto, Wordsworth also argues for a kind of primitivism, part of which is the idea that rustic thought and language are essentially poetic. He argues that “simple” people (perhaps especially farmers), surrounded as they are by the natural world, are capable of tremendous, though unschooled, imagination. Here, then, is where Thomas’s hill farmer parts ways with Wordsworth’s imaginative farmer. Nature, rather than inspiring Thomas’s farmer, simply “wraps the bareness of his mind”. The vacant-minded Prytherch and his kind have fallen into a kind of ritualistic sleep, becoming so preoccupied with the plough and the rigid demands of their labours that they have “laid waste the brain’s/Potential richness in delight/And beauty” (“Priest and Peasant”, SYT 109). Therefore, the hill farmer has a deep-rooted, physical affinity with Wales, but not an imaginative one. This conflict, between “potential richness” and actual barrenness—between the farmer’s *potential* for a Romantic connection with the earth and the *reality* of a laborious life of parochialism and materialism—is a continuing source of tension in the Manafon poems, where “the hills had grace” and “the light clothed them / With wild beauty”, but the farmer possesses “no kinship with the earth”:

The two things
That could redeem your ignorance, the beauty
And grace that trees and flowers labour to teach,
Were never yours, you shut your heart against them.
(“Valediction”, *AL* 29)

While *The Golden Treasury* and the Georgian poets offered Thomas numerous examples of poetry that could express a Romantic, imaginative “kinship with the earth”, nothing in the lines of those stylistic models could express its opposite, namely an *un*-Romantic existence dominated by an *un*imaginative devotion to the soil, something Thomas had not encountered in poetry prior to being confronted by the realities of Manafon.

However, in his search to find poetic expression for his perceptions of Manafon farm life, Thomas appears to have found a model in the work of another Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh, whose *The Great Hunger* was first published by the Cuala Press in 1942, the same year Thomas moved to Manafon and was initially exposed to the kind of severe, land-dominated, unimaginative farm life that is portrayed in Kavanagh’s poem. Thomas certainly would have been familiar with Kavanagh’s earlier work, which had appeared in *The Dublin Magazine*, and Brown has also observed that an extract from *The Great Hunger* appeared in the January 1942 edition of *Horizon*, the journal which had published Thomas’s “Homo Sapiens” just months earlier. That extract “was entitled ‘The Old Peasant’ and the term ‘peasant’ is used at several points in the poem”.⁶⁷ The “hunger” of Kavanagh’s poem does not refer to the Irish famines of the mid-nineteenth century, but rather to a starvation of the affections and of the imagination that Kavanagh found in the lives of farmers in rural Ireland. Significantly, a distinction between these two kinds of “hunger” is made by R. S. Thomas in the opening poem of *Tares* (1961):

There are two hungers, hunger for bread
And hunger of the uncouth soul
For the light’s grace. I have seen both
And chosen for an indulgent world’s
Ear the story of one whose hands

⁶⁷ Brown, R. S. *Thomas* 19. “Homo Sapiens” appeared in *Horizon* 4.22 (1941): 232.

Have bruised themselves on the locked doors
 Of life; whose heart, fuller than mine
 Of gulped tears, is the dark well
 From which to draw, drop after drop,
 The terrible poetry of his kind.

(“The Dark Well” T 9)

In fact, the idea of hungering (in both senses of that word) seems to have been very much on Thomas’s mind when he named two of his post-Manafon volumes, *Poetry for Supper* (1958) and *The Bread of Truth* (1963), and it is possible that the idea of hunger (and the alleviation of hunger) in Thomas’s poems is in part a sustained response to Kavanagh’s poem. Crotty, in a piece that analyzes and compares *The Great Hunger* and Thomas’s *The Minister*, begins by citing John Montague’s remark that the “releasing influence” of *The Great Hunger* on “other writers, from R. S. Thomas to Seamus Heaney, has yet to be estimated,”⁶⁸ and it appears that *The Great Hunger* was, in fact, both an imaginative and stylistic “release” for Thomas, offering a kind of anti-Romantic poetry that expressed not only the harsh, earthy lives of farmers, but also the unimaginative existence that was their day-to-day routine. “Is there some light of imagination in these wet clods?” asks Kavanagh’s narrator on the poem’s opening page.⁶⁹ And for the most part, the answer is no. The “peasant ploughman who is half a vegetable” might be stirred from his blindness by “sudden stone-falling or the desire to breed” (*GH* 29), but “the peasant, with very rare exceptions, is deprived of that visionary imagination which transfigured the [. . .] landscape for Kavanagh and enabled him to transcend the horror and boredom of country life. Peasantry in *The Great Hunger* is defined [. . .] less as a

⁶⁸ Patrick Crotty, “Lean Parishes: Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger* and R. S. Thomas’s *The Minister*”, *Dangerous Diversity: The Changing Faces of Wales*, ed. Katie Gramich and Andrew Hiscock (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1998) 133. Crotty also quotes John Montague’s later comment that Thomas “was so impressed by *The Great Hunger* that he rewrote it twice in Anglo-Welsh terms”, first as “The Airy Tomb” and then as *The Minister*. Although Crotty finds “The Airy Tomb” to be a far lesser achievement than *The Great Hunger*, and the evidence of debt on Thomas’s part “suggestive rather than conclusive”, he finds the thematic parallels between *The Great Hunger* and Thomas’s *The Minister* to be “almost overwhelming”.

⁶⁹ Patrick Kavanagh, *The Great Hunger* (Dublin: The Cuala Press, 1942) 1. Further references are included in the text (*GH*).

station in life than as a state of semi-consciousness, remote from imaginative awareness".⁷⁰

Above all, peasantry is portrayed by Kavanagh as devotion to the earth, where "The peasant's intellectual energy, like his physical stamina, is drained from him by the clayey soil to which he gives his life".⁷¹ Indeed, in Kavanagh's poem, it is the landscape itself that demands ultimate devotion from the farmers and deprives them of fulfilment. The opening line of *The Great Hunger*—"Clay is the word and clay is the flesh" (GH 1)—bonds Maguire and his men to the landscape and plays on the biblical Incarnation, "And the Word was made flesh", making the land the object of worship, both the word and the flesh, the ultimate devotee of the farmers' lives. Indeed, as in Thomas's *Manafon* poems, the line between man and soil is blurred. Clay *is* flesh. This idea is further strengthened in the lines "He saw the sunlight and begrudged no man / His share of what the miserly soil and soul / Gives in a season to a ploughman" (GH 23). Here, Kavanagh's juxtaposing of the almost identical words "soil" and "soul" blurs the distinction between the words, so that the soul of the farmers (or "soul" that is Maguire, the protagonist, depending on one's reading of "soul") is almost indistinguishable from the soil that demands devotion. One is reminded of the earlier-quoted lines from Thomas's "Soil": "The soil is all; / His hands fondle it, and his bones / Are formed out of it with the swedes"; additionally, Kavanagh's reference to the season reminds one of Iago Prytherch, who continues to plough "season by season". A similar comparison, between soul and soil, is also made at the poem's opening, where "the last soul passively like a bag of wet clay / Rolls down the side of the hill" (GH 1). The idea of the land being seductive is also important to both poets. For example, in his youth, Maguire "dreamt / The innocence of young brambles" before succumbing to the pull of earth: "O the grip, O the grip of irregular fields! No man escapes" (GH 3). In a strikingly

⁷⁰ Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Critical Study* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1991) 128.

⁷¹ John Nemo, *Patrick Kavanagh* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979) 65.

similar way, Thomas's "village boy" spends his youth "in the fields by thorn and thistle tuft", but he, too, succumbs to the fields' pull: "from such unconscious grace / Earth breeds and beckons to the stubborn plough" ("Farm Child" *AL* 37).

Stylistically, *The Great Hunger* is a free verse poem in the main, but its style can range from traditional rhyme and metre to "a conversational rhythm that not only mimics the Monaghan accent but is attuned to [the] characters' unvoiced moods".⁷² In fact, part of the "releasing influence" of Kavanagh's poem upon other writers came from the sheer variety of its style(s). At times *The Great Hunger* can be colloquial to the point of sounding like prose—

The school-girls passed his house laughing every morning
And sometimes they spoke to him familiarly—
He had an idea. School-girls of thirteen
Would see no political intrigue in an old man's friendship. (*GH* 21)

—but also includes frequent moments of iambic regularity:

The grass was wet and over-leaned the path—
And Agnes held her skirts sensationally up [. . .] (*GH* 13)

And there are sections where both rhyme and metre are used consistently. Section III, for example, is written in three sonnet-like stanzas, each of which includes lines of flawless iambic pentameter, where the line breaks mainly coincide with syntax:

Yet sometimes when the sun comes through a gap
These men know God the Father in a tree:
The Holy Spirit is the rising sap,
And Christ will be the green leaves that will come
At Easter from the sealed and guarded tomb. (*GH* 7)

Yet the poem also includes sections of heavily-enjambed, shorter lines, where the line breaks do not correspond with syntax:

Outside, a noise like a rat
Among the hen-roosts. The cock crows over
The frosted townland of the night.
Eleven o'clock and still the game

⁷² Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Critical Study* 146.

Twm was a dunce at school, and was whipped and shaken
 More than I care to say, but without avail,
 For where one man can lead a horse to a pail,
 Twenty can't make him drink what is not to his mind [. . .]
 ("The Airy Tomb" *SF* 42)

Perhaps what R. S. Thomas primarily found in *The Great Hunger* was a linguistic register appropriate to the new way of life he was confronting in Manafon. Thomas has said that seeing the Manafon farmers "squelching through liquid mud, rain pouring down" really "gave [him] quite a prod in the direction of realistic poetry",⁷³ and *The Great Hunger* was an example of that realism, a poem that embraced what Thomas calls "muck and blood and hardness, the rain and the spittle and the phlegm of farm life".⁷⁴ "In place of the romantic and often fanciful registers of Palgrave and the Georgians [. . .] Kavanagh presented a language which is direct, tactile, rooted in the world of the rural workers' daily toil [. . .] a language unafraid to confront the unattractive physicalities of this life".⁷⁵ Examples of this tactile, earthy, messy, and uncouth language abound in *The Great Hunger*: "wet clods", "wet clay", "weedy clods", "tangled skeins", "withered stalks", "grunts and spits / Through a clay-wattled moustache", "grotesque shapes", "clean his arse / With perennial grass", "a wizened face", "twisting sod", "put down / The seeds blindly with sensuous groping fingers", "Coughed the prayer phlegm up from his throat and sighed: Amen", "a wet weed twined" (*GH* 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10). Thomas's response to this linguistic register appears to have been both prompt and enthusiastic, amounting to what Ward calls "a libidinous relish for immersion in the liquid, glutinous and messy", where "Bilge, sweat and muck abound".⁷⁶ In "A Peasant"—which, again, was Thomas's first poetic attempt to deal with Manafon farm life—we find several examples of a register as palpable and viscous as the images in *The Great Hunger*, a register that is pervasive in the Manafon period: "chipping the green skin / From the yellow

⁷³ "R. S. Thomas in Conversation with Molly Price-Owen" 93.

⁷⁴ John Ormond, "R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet" 50.

⁷⁵ Brown, *R. S. Thomas* 21-22.

⁷⁶ Ward, *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas* 39.

bones”, “churning the crude earth”, “stiff sea of clods”, “leans to gob in the fire”, “clothes, sour with years of sweat / And animal contact”. We have already discussed “A Peasant” in the context of Thomas’s attempt to give himself Welsh roots and, ultimately, to define himself. In this light, the linguistic register that Thomas found in Kavanagh and began to incorporate zealously into his verse can be seen as a way to further distance himself from his bourgeois background. In Brown’s words,

Presumably this “relish” for that which will shock conventional tastes is a measure of Thomas’s determination to emancipate himself from the bourgeois refinement of his upbringing; it is, in other words, another manifestation of his seeking for some new mode of life, a sense of wholeness that does not repress the physical, the “unrespectable” levels of the self.⁷⁷

Thomas’s “relish” for the soil is, in fact, more than an “emancipation” from “bourgeois refinement”; it is also the beginning of an emancipation from cultural clichés which are often used by bourgeois outsiders to compartmentalize the Welsh and reinforce false stereotypes.

One does not, however, wish to overplay Thomas’s response to *The Great Hunger*, significant as that response was. As Crotty observes, “much of [R. S. Thomas’s] early work is austere and laconic in a way which clearly owes nothing to the example of the Irish poet”.⁷⁸ For example, Kavanagh, as we have seen, employs iambic meter at times in *The Great Hunger*. In contrast Thomas, whose pre-Manafon poems were commonly built on iambic frames, scarcely writes an iambic line in the poems written at Manafon and does not return to traditional metre in his subsequent volumes. And Thomas’s above-mentioned stress patterns—the most prominent and consistent feature of his Manafon style—owes nothing to Kavanagh. The two poets also write from very different perspectives. “Kavanagh writes as a post-nationalist poet, Thomas as a [budding]

⁷⁷ Brown, *R. S. Thomas* 22.

⁷⁸ Crotty, *Lean Parishes* 148.

nationalist one”,⁷⁹ and while Thomas almost always looks at the Montgomeryshire farmers from an outsider’s perspective, Kavanagh was born and brought up in Inniskeen, County Monaghan, so that he had experienced rural Ireland’s social pressures firsthand. But notwithstanding the poets’ differences, Thomas’s response to Kavanagh was an important part of his development in Manafon, and the “releasing influence” of *The Great Hunger* seems to have spurred him in the direction of a poetry that was both more physical and less formal.

A Trifle Too Sweet

I was more conventionally motivated lyrically in Manafon.[. . .] and rhyme, both terminally and internally, conveyed best my view of the hill country at that time. Later the same hill country seemed to be aside from so many contemporary currents and rhyme seemed to be a trifle too sweet in the attempt to come to terms with those currents.⁸⁰

Reading the poetry written at Manafon, one can see R. S. Thomas distancing himself from what we might call “conventional” English prosody. Of course one must be careful when using such a word, for the established conventions of poetry change, but clearly elements such as rhyme, metre, and lines arranged into stanzas have been part of the poetic “norm” for centuries and in any case were the conventions to which R. S. Thomas had been exposed during his pre-Manafon years. While we have already discussed his movement away from lines measured by metrical feet and towards more “free” rhythms determined by carefully-arranged stress patterns, this movement is also accompanied by a movement away from rhymed lines and towards free verse. As Thomas mentions in the above excerpt, he would eventually abandon end-rhyme altogether. Indeed, the phrase “*more* conventionally motivated lyrically” is used to compare his early work with his later work which, while retaining many lyrical properties, grows increasingly less conventional and much more experimental. But even in the Manafon poems, where Thomas

⁷⁹ Ibid. 145.

⁸⁰ “Probings” 44.

frequently uses rhyme, one suspects that the “conventional” uses of rhyme already seemed “a trifle too sweet” for the poet, for even though he uses rhyme frequently, he does not use it consistently or traditionally.⁸¹

In conventional English prosody (and here again one must be careful with generalizations, defining “conventional” as the traditional styles of prosody that Thomas would have learned from *The Golden Treasury* and the Georgian poets), rhyme is not used arbitrarily. Whether a poet writes in couplets, triplets, tercets, quatrains, or some arrangement of his or her own invention, the rhyme typically follows a scheme: be it heroic couplets, the elegiac quatrain (*abab*), the so-called In Memoriam stanza (*abba*), or longer arrangements like the sonnet, the Spenserian stanza, *ottava rima*, and *rime royale*. The Manafon poems, however, do not usually follow any such traditional rhyme scheme. Thomas does frequently write with successive couplets:

That man, Prytherch, with the torn cap,
I saw him often, framed in the gap
Between two hazels with his sharp eyes,
Bright as thorns, watching the sunrise [. . .]
(“The Gap in the Hedge” *AL* 15)

And so he returned to the Bwlch to help his father
With the rough work of the farm, to ditch, and gather
The slick ewes from the hill; to milk the cow,
And coax the mare that dragged the discordant plough.
(“The Airy Tomb” *SF* 42)

Shelley dreamed it. Now the dream decays.
The props crumble. The familiar ways
Are stale with tears trodden underfoot.
The heart’s flower withers at the root.
(“Song at the Year’s Turning” *SYT* 101)

But Thomas also uses rhyme in nonce forms—non-conventional forms created by the poet—as in “The Lonely Furrow” (*AL* 36), a three-stanza poem which follows the rhyme scheme *aabab*—and, more commonly, in idiosyncratic ways, where rhyme comes

⁸¹ Thomas gives a similar account to Molly Price-Owen: “As I rubbed my nose in the crude life of the hill farmer I no longer felt that rhyming couplets or stanzas were appropriate. It was really too romantic [. . .] to be able to enable me to say what I wanted to say about this hard life” (“R. S. Thomas in Conversation with Molly Price-Owen” 100).

and goes and does not follow any predictable pattern. In “A Peasant”, for example, the rhyme scheme, if it can be called a scheme at all, is *a-b-a-c-c-d-e-d-f-f-g-g-e-h-e-i-j-j-i-j-k-k*. Some of the line endings, such as “e” and “j”, have three rhymes (*wind, mind, refined; season, attrition, confusion*), but two line endings, “b” and “h” (*hills, sweat*), have no rhyme at all. While the reader might initially be tempted to either view the unrhymed lines as an oversight or to imbue the unrhymed words with a significance that they do not warrant in the context of the poem, one also realizes that a wholly rhymed—even if irregularly so—poem would perhaps seem too orderly for the material being expressed in “A Peasant”; the irregularity of the form seems appropriate to a subject matter which is meant to be unsettling to the reader.

Thomas’s also frequently makes no significant distinction between end-rhyme and other sonic devices. The following stanza is from “Depopulation of the Hills” (*AL* 14):

Did the earth help them, time befriend
 These last survivors? Did the spring grass
 Heal winter’s ravages? The grass
 Wrecked them in its draughty tides,
 Grew from the chimney-stack like smoke,
 Burned its way through the weak timbers.
 That was nature’s jest, the sides
 Of the old hull cracked, but not with mirth.

The part of a poetic line that is most emphatic is its ending. This is true even in free-verse, but rhyme heightens that emphasis. As Paul Fussell explains,

Every part of a poetic line accumulates weight progressively: every part anticipates the end of the line. This is less because the line is positioned in a poem than because the line is a unit of measured time. Even if the end of the line offers us no rhyme to signal the fruition of the accumulation, the end of the line constitutes an accumulation of forces [. . .].⁸²

Knowing this, poets try to place thematically-significant words at the end of lines to emphasize them, and they often use rhyme to heighten that attention. Additionally, they

⁸² Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979) 167.

use rhyme to point out relationships between words. That is, words that rhyme with each other are compared and contrasted, and this is particularly true in poems, like many of R. S. Thomas's early poems, where end-rhyme is not used consistently. Why, the reader wonders, do these lines rhyme while others do not? What is significant about these words that the poet has chosen to heighten my awareness of them? In "Depopulation of the Hills", the terminal words are well-placed. *Grass, tides, timbers, smoke, sides, and mirth* are all thematically significant and warrant their position at the end of the line. However, the poem's end-rhyme does not rise to another level of import; the rhyming words are no more significant than the poem's other terminal words. Once again rhyme seems less important to the poem than assonance and consonance. The poem is full of assonance (*grass, ravages, draughty, stack, cracked, winter's, chimney, timbers*), and its consonance crosses over into internal rhyme (*wrecked, smoke, stack, cracked, weak*). Surrounded by so much assonance and internal rhyme, the comparatively scant end-rhyme (*tides/sides*) seems less consequential. Of course that exact rhyme does call attention to itself, but it does so at the expense of the last line; after the closure of an exact rhyme in the penultimate line, the poem's terminal word, "mirth", seem anti-climactic. Of course one might argue that the "mirth" does have a rhyme—there is arguably an *earth/mirth* rhyme in the poem—but the words are perhaps too far apart to register as rhyme; in fact, they are less noticeable even than the subtle vowel rhyme *timbers/mirth* (speaking of the "e" in timbers, not the "i"), which is arranged as end-rhyme. Thomas's choice to take the emphasis off of the poem's end-rhyme may reflect the influence of Austin Clarke, who believed that internal rhyme "takes the clapper from the bell of rhyme" and that "by cross-rhymes or vowel-rhyming [. . .] lovely and neglected words are advanced to the tonic place and divide their echoes".⁸³ But Clarke also believed that "By means of assonance, we can gradually approach, lead up to rhyme, bring it out so clearly, so truly as the mood needs, that it

⁸³ *The Collected Poems of Austin Clarke* 547.

becomes indeed the very *vox caelistis*'.⁸⁴ In other words, when end-rhyme is used, it should stand out as something significant, rising above the other words of the poem. However, this seems of little concern to Thomas, whose rhymes are used as one sonic device among many, and of no outstanding importance. And while he uses enjambment effectively in the poem ("the grass / Wrecked them in its draughty tides[...]") underscores the destructive action of the grass), he pays a price for using the technique in successive lines because the repetition of "grass" creates a conspicuous end-rhyme (if a repeated word can be called a rhyme) that makes the stanza seem unbalanced.

"A Priest to His People" (SF 29) provides a fuller illustration of how Thomas uses rhyme in the Manafon poems. Sometimes the rhyme is used to great effect, enhancing line endings and drawing out interesting relationships between rhyming words. At other times the rhyme appears arbitrary, simply present for the sake of adornment. Indeed, viewing the way rhyme comes and goes, following no distinct pattern and occurring at the end of lines of varying length, one can see Thomas beginning to move in the direction of free verse:

Men of the hills, wantoners, men of Wales,
 With your sheep and your pigs and your ponies, your sweaty females,
 How I have hated you for your irreverence, your scorn even
 Of the refinements of art and the mysteries of the Church,
 I whose invective would spurt like a flame of fire
 To be quenched always in the coldness of your stare.
 Men of bone, wrenched from the bitter moorland,
 Who have not yet shaken the moss from your savage skulls,
 Or prayed the peat from your eyes,
 Did you detect like an ewe or an ailing wether,
 Driven into the undergrowth by the nagging flies,
 My true heart wandering in a wood of lies?

In general, the terminal words of these lines justify the attention they get, but there are exceptions. "Even", for example, is weaker than the other terminal words, and "flies" seems of only secondary importance to the poem. But in terms of rhyme, the poem

⁸⁴ Quoted in Maurice Harmon, *Austin Clarke, 1896-1974: A Critical Introduction* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1989) 22.

begins with several effective examples. The first rhyme is a couplet (*Wales/females*) that is intentionally inflammatory. The “females” of Wales are placed on the same level as pigs and ponies, and because they rhyme with “Wales”, those “sweaty females” become a synecdoche for the entire nation. Thus, the rhyme immediately establishes the “invective” of the poem, as well as its critical tone (which is ultimately self-critical as much as it is derogatory). The next rhyme is also a couplet (*fire/stare*), although it is an approximate rather than exact rhyme. This rhyme works extremely well because the priest’s “fire” is directly compared to the congregations’ “stare”, which is cold, the complete opposite of fire. In other words, the disparity between the priest and his congregation is heightened by the rhyme. The phrase that creates the rhyme, “flame of fire”, seems ill-chosen and redundant until one considers that the same phrase is used several times in the Bible as a metaphor for God (as in Revelation 19:12: “His eyes were as a flame of fire”). Thus, the rhyme not only enforces the congregation’s indifference to the priest, but also to the God he represents. Of the poem’s final four lines, three rhyme with each other (*eyes/flies/lies*). While the relationship between “eyes” and “lies” is an interesting one, bringing the eyes of the congregation into direct comparison with the “lies” of the priest’s heart, there seems to be no thematic link between “flies” and the other two words. This is not to suggest that all rhyming words in a poem must relate thematically to each other, but rhyming words, at their most effective, do play off each other and create meaning. The next stanza of the poem offers several more examples of this.

You are curt and graceless, yet your sudden laughter
Is sharp and bright as a whipped pool,
When the wind strikes or the clouds are flying;
And all the devices of church and school
Have failed to cripple your unhallowed movements,
Or put a halter on your wild soul.
You are lean and spare, yet your strength is a mockery
Of the pale words in the black Book,

And why should you come like sparrows for bread crumbs,
Whose hands can dabble in the world's blood?

The three most obvious rhymes in this stanza (*pool/school/soul*) work well because the words bring the essential elements of the poem into direct contrast. “Pool” represents the natural world, “school” represents the background of the speaker, and “soul” represents the hill farmers. The “soul” of the farmers is inseparable from the “pool”; that is, the farmer is inseparable from the natural world. The rhyme reinforces the feelings of the speaker, the idea that although the priest is concerned with the farmers’ souls, he recognizes that to tame the wildness of the soul by doctrine is to diminish it. The word “soul” also stands in sharp contrast to “school”, which embodies the learnedness of the speaker, again reinforcing the difference and division between the priest and his people. The stanza also makes good use of less-obvious rhymes. For example, “Book” rhymes with the first syllable of “mockery”, and the pairing of those two words encapsulates the idea that formal religion is of little value to the farmers’ lives. Additionally, “crumbs” and “blood” are a vowel rhyme, and by pitting those two words against each other, Thomas again demonstrates the difference between two very different ways of life. By mentioning sparrows, Thomas is of course alluding to Christ’s teaching that God cares for mankind as He cares for the sparrows, but the word “crumbs” makes God’s bread (i.e. formal religion and the sacraments) seem meagre when compared with “the world’s blood”, its very essence.⁸⁵

Unlike the other stanzas of the poem, the third stanza has no unrhymed line endings. This gives the stanza a feeling of continuity that the others lack. Yet the rhymes are again used to varying degrees of effectiveness.

I have taxed your ignorance of rhyme and sonnet,
Your want of deference to the painter’s skill,
But I know, as I listen, that your speech has in it
The source of all poetry, clear as a rill

⁸⁵ See KJV Matt. 10:29-31; Luke 12:6-7.

Bubbling from your lips; and what brushwork could equal
The artistry of your dwelling on the bare hill?

The first rhyme of this stanza (*sonnet/in it*) is the weakest. While the rhyme does reinforce the idea that the farmers' speech has poetry "in it", "in it" is itself a weak line ending.

The stanza's other line endings (*skill/rill/equal/hill*) all rhyme with each other, and they work in a manner similar to the *pool/school/soul* rhymes of the previous stanza, albeit less-effectively. "Skill" has to do with education while "rill" and "hill" are parts of the natural world, so these rhymes reinforce the contrast between learned and natural "artistry".

However, "equal", an approximate rhyme with those same words, has only a vague attachment to them. The rhymes in this stanza, then, do resonate with each other to some degree, but they do not encapsulate the thematic content as well as those of the previous stanza.

In the poem's final stanza, Thomas returns to mixing rhymed and unrhymed

lines:

You will forgive, then, my initial hatred,
My first intolerance of your uncouth ways,
You who are indifferent to all that I can offer,
Caring not whether I blame or praise.
With your pigs and your sheep and your sons
and holly-cheeked daughters
You will still continue to unwind your days
In a crude tapestry under the jealous heavens
To affront, bewilder, yet compel my gaze.

The immediately-noticeable rhymes in this stanza are "ways", "days", and "gaze". Ending the poem with the word "gaze" is quite effective since the poem is largely about watching and studying the hill farmers. Indeed, much of the Manafon poetry is about Thomas looking in on the hill farmers from an outsider's perspective, considering their "ways" over the course of many "days". It is also a consciously "open" verb, in the sense that the act of gazing is continuous. There is therefore an interesting and effective tension created by the *closure* of the poem's final rhyme and the *openness* and continuity of

the speaker's action. In contrast, the *offer/daughters* rhyme is perhaps the weakest of the poem, an example of rhyme that exists solely for rhyme's sake. And while "sons" is technically not a terminal word, it appears to be one because of the way the poem is printed, creating the appearance of a *sons/heavens* rhyme. "Jealous heavens" of course reminds one of the Old Testament relationship between God and his chosen people, where God is referred to as a "jealous God".⁸⁶ The *sons/heavens* rhyme thus subtly introduces the idea of the Welsh as a chosen people (in this sense, the "His" in the poem's title might refer to God, rather than back to the priest). This seems like a bit of a stretch until one considers that Thomas introduced the same idea on other occasions.⁸⁷

"A Priest to His People", then, offers several examples of how Thomas uses rhyme to encapsulate and expand upon his themes, but it also shows how he uses rhyme inconsistently, occasionally using it strictly for lyrical purposes. One must remember that Thomas is in stylistic transition, and that his poetic background prior to arriving in Manafon was almost exclusively with rhyming poetry, so it is understandable that despite a clear shift toward free verse and a less "traditional" style, those earlier prosodic conventions would still be present at times. Yet "A Priest to His People" clearly shows how Thomas avoids conventional rhyme schemes, preferring to use rhyme according to his ear's preference, rather than according to a predetermined order, and this, again, demonstrates Thomas's development toward a less-formal style. Indeed, near the end of the Manafon period, Thomas wrote several poems that we might call "hybrid" poems, in that they retain some of the characteristics of his early work but also look forward to his less-formal style of the late 1950s and 60s. These poems use more enjambment, and they

⁸⁶ As part of the Ten Commandments, for example, God tells Moses, "I the LORD thy God am a jealous God" (KJV Exod. 20:5).

⁸⁷ In "A Welsh Testament" (T 39), Thomas writes: "Even God had a Welsh name: / We spoke to him in the old language; / He was to have a particular care / For the Welsh people". Of course the word "Testament" in the title of the poem evokes scripture. And Wintle points out a possible (though not definitive) interpretation of the word "chosen" in "The Small Window" (NBF 38), arguing that lines about the beauty of Wales—"Have a care; / This wealth is for the few / And chosen"—are an example of "God's favour [being] reserved for the members of one race only". See *Furious Interiors: Wales, R. S. Thomas, and God* 17.

are, for the most part, written in free verse although the free-verse lines are interspersed with end-rhyme. A good example of this kind of poem is “Priest and Peasant” (SYT 109):

You are ill, Davies, ill in mind;
 An old canker, to your kind
 Peculiar, has laid waste the brain's
 Potential richness in delight
 And beauty; and your body grows
 Awry like an old thorn for lack
 Of the soil's depth; and sickness there
 Uncurls slowly its small tongues
 Of fungus that shall, thickening, swell
 And choke you, while your few leaves
 Are green still.

And so you work
 In the wet fields and suffer pain
 And loneliness as a tree takes
 The night's darkness, the day's rain;
 While I watch you, and pray for you,
 And so increase my small store
 Of credit in the bank of God,
 Who sees you suffer and me pray
 And touches you with the sun's ray,
 That heals not, yet blinds my eyes
 And seals my lips as Job's were sealed
 Imperiously in the old days.

This style of this poem foreshadows many of the poems in *Poetry For Supper* (1958) and *Tares* (1961), where Thomas generally uses three or four stresses per line, and each line is roughly the same length as the others. There are stylistic holdovers from Thomas's more “conventional” poetry, such as capitalizing the first letter of each line (a way of signalling that each line is its own unit, a technique that Thomas would eventually abandon), and there is intermittent end-rhyme. Yet the poem's enjambment, coupled with its many unrhymed lines, plays against those conventions so that the poem exists somewhere between formal and free verse. The poem starts out with a couplet (*mind/ kind*), which prepares the reader for a poem written in couplets, but there is no other exact rhyme in the first stanza although there is, as in the other poems we have discussed, abundant assonance: *Davies, canker, waste; your, grows, old, thorn, soil, slowly, choke; ill, richness, sickness,*

still; tongues, fungus, etc. But the lines of “Priest and Peasant” are end-stopped less frequently than those of the other poems we have discussed; instead of a full pause at the end of the line, the reader only encounters the hesitation created by a line break. This can create surprising effects when Thomas uses unexpected words after line breaks, as in “to your kind / Peculiar” and “your body grows / Awry”. At this stage of his development, Thomas has seemingly become very aware of the poem on the page, a visual object as much as an aural one. He accepts the idea that the reader must pause, even if it is briefly, at the end of every line, and this hesitation creates both complex rhythms and moments of surprise. These moments often cause the reader to reconsider meaning and adjust expectations. In “Priest and Peasant”, Thomas places syntactical pauses at places other than the end of the line, saving his full pauses for medial caesuras, which he creates with commas and, less frequently, semicolons. But none of these pauses stops the movement of the line. In fact, the first stanza is only one sentence, and the same is true of the second stanza. The poem reads faster than a frequently end-stopped poem, maintaining its energy, and the reader quickly learns that the line is not a complete grammatical unit or a complete phrase. It becomes less what Fussell, in the above quotation, calls “a unit of measured time” than a moment of attention within the larger unit of the stanza or the poem. Rhyme, when it does appear, can accentuate an individual line, heightening the reader’s awareness of it, as it does frequently in the second stanza (*pain/rain; pray/ray; eyes/days*); but the rhyme is not used, as it is in others of Thomas’s poems, to point out associations between words, though these are unavoidable when rhyme is used (the rhyming of “pain” with “rain”, for example, casts a gloomy shadow on the second stanza). The end-rhyme, then, is less a tool to tie words together than it is a nod towards structure and form, a reminder that this is not quite free verse and that the reader is still encountering a “made” object.

In this “hybrid” style, Thomas still uses his technique of “stress pairings”—“soil’s depth”, “few leaves”, “wet fields”, “day’s rain”, “sun’s ray”—and these slow the pace of the lines somewhat. But the rhythm of the lines is no longer dictated by stress; that, is, Thomas is not primarily breaking up longer lines with carefully-arranged stress patterns. Nor is he primarily using those stresses to “root” the poem in palpable elements, particularly elements from the Welsh landscape. As Ward observes, “The strongly succulent vocabulary of mud, dripping trees and heavy fields is present still, but it does not constitute the poetry’s material; it is more spaced out”.⁸⁸ The lines are shorter, lighter and less methodical. And one notes that this development in style coincides with a declared thematic shift at the end of the Manafon period. In “No Through Road” (SYT 115), the last poem of *Song at the Year’s Turning*, Thomas declares an end to the breed of poetry that inseparably links man and soil:

All in vain. I will cease now
My long absorption with the plough,
With the tame and wild creatures
And man united with the earth.
I have failed after many seasons
To bring truth to birth,
And nature’s simple equations
In the mind’s precincts do not apply.

But where to turn? Earth endures
After the passing, necessary shame
Of winter, and the old lie
Of green places beckons me still
From the new world, ugly and evil,
That men pry for in truth’s name.

Despite this stated “ceasing” of Thomas’s “absorption with the plough”, the end of the Manafon period does not immediately signal an end to its themes. Thomas’s next several volumes include poems about Prytherch and other farmers, and the reader encounters several variations on the theme of “man united with the earth”. But even though Thomas, after he leaves Manafon, frequently looks back on his life there and continues

⁸⁸ Ward, *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas* 62.

to explore its subject matter in his poems, his poetry is not regressive. The question—"But where to turn?"—puts Thomas in limbo, but the poem itself answers the question, as the speaker "turns" into himself. "No Through Road" is more overtly introspective than the earlier poems written at Manafon, which are more outward-looking, observant, and usually only secondarily about the speaker. While one must not ignore Thomas's outward-looking political poems of the 1960s, the poems of the late 50s and 60s—in fact, Thomas's work as a whole—are increasingly introspective. And the mathematical diction ("nature's simple equations") is also forward-looking, a foreshadowing of Thomas's interest in science, as well as his concern with the darker side of "new" thinking, here described as "the new world / ugly and evil, / That men pry for in truth's name". And just as Thomas's subject matter is not regressive, neither is his style. One recalls Thomas's above-quoted remark: "Later the same hill country seemed to be aside from so many contemporary currents and rhyme seemed to be a trifle too sweet in the attempt to come to terms with those currents". These "contemporary currents" increasingly affect Thomas's stylistic development. Even as his poems become progressively more introspective, they also become more stylistically progressive, a reflection of the changing world that Thomas must confront, and in which his introspection must take place.

Chapter 3: A Style Defined (1955-1972)

Each generation brings with it its own style, its own concerns, its own discoveries. These must be discussed and disseminated among other ways through language. New terms, new connotations of words must be employed. The new wine cannot be put into the old bottles. And so each generation of poets is preoccupied with the problem of what language to use, of what words are suitable for poetry and what not. Sometimes there is a reversion to an earlier fashion; sometimes an almost complete break with tradition.

(“Words and the Poet” SP 55)

As a priest [. . .] it is part of my function to look at things from a slightly different angle from the way in which you would look at them, and therefore experience crystallizing within me, expresses itself in language which is bound to have this imprint; the mark of the person who wrote it because he was a priest and because he was a countryman and because he was a Welshman who was deprived of his birthright.

(“The Making of a Poem” SP 90)

During the 1960s, R. S. Thomas delivered two revealing addresses on the craft of poetry. The first, “Words and the Poet”, was given as the W. D. Thomas Memorial Lecture at the University College of Swansea in November, 1963. The second, “The Making of a Poem”, was delivered at the Thirty-fifth Conference of Library Authorities in Wales and Monmouthshire in 1968. The addresses contain not only the poet’s views on stylistic fundamentals—rhythmic texture, rhyme, emotional colouring, word choice—but also statements on broader issues that influenced his stylistic choices, among them poetry’s place in the modern world and, perhaps most significantly, the relationship between the maker and the made object. While they contain only a relatively small portion of the many style-related comments Thomas made throughout his career, these addresses are particularly salient because they were delivered during Thomas’s years as vicar at St. Michael’s, Eglwys-fach (1954-1967), “a period of considerable personal anguish” for Thomas,¹ when his poetry began, consistently and profoundly, to bear “the mark” of that anguish. It is therefore not surprising that it was also a period which found Thomas

¹ Brown, “Blessings, Stevens”: R. S. Thomas and Wallace Stevens” 115.

preoccupied anew with questions of style and “with the problem of what language to use”. Largely due to these factors—an increasingly-introspective verse and, relatedly, a renewed preoccupation with craft—R. S. Thomas’s time at Eglwys-fach saw him settle into what might be called his definitive style. “Definitive” in this sense does not mean developmentally finished, of course, but is synonymous with “characteristic”, meaning that the poems exhibit stylistic traits which are commonly present in his mature work. Although some poets and critics have ascribed a “tiresome predictability” to the poetry,² the truth is that one of the most predictable features of Thomas’s style is its *mutability*. Indeed, even the styles of contemporaneous R. S. Thomas poems, including those published within the same volume, can vary significantly, and the entire notion of stylistic evolution takes for granted variation and adaptation. “I am a lyric poet, I think”, Thomas tells J. B. Lethbridge. “A lyric poet to me is a person who changes, you don’t ever remain the same for long”.³ But despite this variation, the poems written at St. Michael’s nevertheless have in common many stylistic traits—traits which remain even into the late poetry. Again, this measure of stylistic consistency can be attributed to a sustained, albeit agonized and angst-ridden, period of introspection. Thomas has usefully been described as a “wounded singer”,⁴ and as his poems begin to confront his “personal anguish” on a consistent basis, the songs themselves become more consistent, coalesce to a degree. Or, borrowing one of Thomas’s metaphors for the act of composition, we might say that at Eglwys-fach, “slowly the blood *congealed* / Like dark flowers saddening a field” (“Composition” PS 40, italics added).

In addition to this self-searching, introspective poetry, R. S. Thomas also writes with an increasingly “public” voice at Eglwys-fach, and a clear tension exists between his personal and public voices. According to Andrew Motion, “Public poetry must address

² Robert Minhinnick, “Living with R. S. Thomas” 12. In a similar vein, Philip Larkin asserts that “[R. S. Thomas’s] images and metaphors are too-often repetitive” (*Guardian* 5 September 1958, 6).

³ “R. S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge”, *Anglo-Welsh Review* 74 (1983): 41.

⁴ Christopher Morgan, *R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003) 7.

occasions squarely, but look beneath and beyond them. Personal poetry must register ambiguities and paradoxes”.⁵ At Eglwys-fach, Thomas juggles both kinds of poetry, even blends them at times, and inevitable tension results, in terms both of form and content. On a personal level, Thomas continues to challenge himself with increasingly searching questions: “All right, I was Welsh. Does it matter?” (“A Welsh Testament” T 39); “What do I find to my taste?” (“Who” P 39); “What is a man’s / Price?” (“There” P 26); “Why must I write so?” (“Welsh” BT 15); “Would I exchange / My life?” (“Wedlock” NBF 13). As a result, the poems are progressively more self-absorbed, demonstrating what Ward calls “the mind in motion with itself”, and they “[bring] into the open the matter of self-knowledge”.⁶ These self-searching questions often lead Thomas back into his past and, as a result, to questions about his life at Manafon: “And Prytherch—was he a real man [. . .]?” (“Which?” T 42); “Did I look long enough or too long?” (“The Face” T 17). Yet on a public level, the opposite is true: for the first time, Thomas begins to look hard at the realities of *present-day* Wales, rather than his own past or an idealized Wales. Faced with a Wales that, in his eyes, *lacks* idealism and seems to be satisfied with modern mass consumerism, Thomas feels a responsibility to illuminate and censure social ills; thus, even though Thomas himself is “*not* part of the public”,⁷ his public poems become social commentary, aimed at the consciousness of the Welsh people.

Thomas’s growing role as a public voice was partially determined by his earlier decision to define himself as a Welsh, rather than English, poet. As Glyn Jones observes,

The tradition exists very powerfully in Wales that the poet is not a man apart, a freak, but rather an accepted part of the social fabric with an important function to perform. The type of writer who turns his back on society and abjures all responsibility towards it [. . .] is almost unknown in Wales.⁸

⁵ “Yes and No” (2000), *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, eds. W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Farnet: Bloodaxe, 2000) 233.

⁶ Ward, *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas* 61.

⁷ From “A Welshman at St. James’s Park” (P 23), italics added.

⁸ Glyn Jones, *The Dragon has Two Tongues* (London: Dent, 1968) 135.

But this “important function” was not a comfortable one for Thomas. While accepting his role as “part of the social fabric”, Thomas was, on a personal level, “a man apart”, and by his own admission “uneasy with relationships”.⁹ While one wishes strongly to resist the persistent clichés about R. S. Thomas as “The Ogre of Wales”,¹⁰ a recluse and a hermit (in short “a freak”), it is nevertheless true that as a man, Thomas increasingly preferred—even cultivated—a kind of separateness that was important to the integrity of his imaginative vision and his ideals. This need for separateness develops gradually, but at Eglwys-fach there is a clear shift—and a demonstrably uncomfortable one—away from his earlier wish to become integrated into Welsh community. This is yet another paradox that is apparent in the Eglwys-fach poems: “[R. S. Thomas’s] learned experience of a Welsh-language culture”¹¹ actually led him further away from the sociality of contemporary Wales and increasingly into the isolation of wild places, literally and imaginatively. Thomas had always sought out wild places, but he had also imagined them as the setting of idealized community, of the Welsh “swapping *englynion*” in the *hafotai*,¹² “with their *eisteddfodau*, in winter, and their harvesting and turf-cutting in the summer”.¹³ Now these same “high pastures of the heart”¹⁴ become a “green asylum”,¹⁵ a place of refuge from “A world that has gone sour”.¹⁶

As we closely examine these tensions, we will also see that Thomas’s *personal* withdrawal from the values of contemporary Welsh social life was directly tied to the most famous part of his *public* voice: his political and nationalistic poems. If Thomas’s idyllic visions of communal life—the “true Wales of [his] imagination”—did not exist in

⁹ Untitled interview with Timothy Wilson, *Guardian* 15 September 1972, 8.

¹⁰ Rogers calls this “A term that stuck after the photograph appeared of the grim figure over the half door” (*The Man Who Went Into the West* 22). Almost without exception, the London papers used this photograph, taken by Howard Barlow, in articles and obituaries about Thomas.

¹¹ M Wynn Thomas, “Keeping His Pen Clean: R. S. Thomas and Wales”, *Miraculous Simplicity* 65.

¹² “The Mountains” (*SP* 32).

¹³ “The Depopulation of the Hill Country” (*SP* 21).

¹⁴ “A Welshman at St. James’s Park” (*P* 23).

¹⁵ “Song” (*SYT* 62).

¹⁶ “Afforestation” (*BT* 17).

contemporary Welsh society, he wanted to know why. His search for answers led him in a political and nationalistic direction. According to Brian Morris,

It may be that the disappointment, the mild frustration at finding that Eglwysfach was not the Welsh Eden to which he was striving to return, bred a kind of resentment, or sense of deprivation, which issued in the overly nationalistic poems in *The Bread of Truth*. He was searching for a society, a way of life and the objective correlatives of that way of life, which were truly and essentially Welsh, and he had not yet found it.¹⁷

While Thomas's "frustration" at Eglwys-fach was in fact much more than "mild", it did indeed breed both resentment and a sense of deprivation. It also bred nationalistic, political, and sociological commentary. This connection, between the private feeling and the public poetry, is more essential than many critics have allowed. From a stylistic viewpoint, these public, political poems exhibit tonal properties which are quite different from those found in Thomas's other work of the same period. As we will see, this is largely due to Thomas's language and, in particular, his choice of imagery (which, one is quick to add, is often detrimental to the poetry).

Thus, in both the private and public poetry, R. S. Thomas's subject matter evolved, and his style followed. To paraphrase the excerpt from "Words and the Poet" at the head of this chapter, the old poetic bottles could not hold the new wine.¹⁸ Thomas was, of course, quite aware of the implications of using Christ's well-known metaphor to describe poetic development. In fact, one wishes to call attention to the increased presence of religious language and metaphor in the poems written at Eglwys-fach. To a degree, spiritual concerns had always been a part of the poems, but Thomas is now increasingly attentive to them. To some extent, this probably arises out of his frustration with his congregation at Eglwys-fach, which, according to Thomas, was largely composed of "retired tea-planters, ex-army officers".¹⁹ These were "people used to

¹⁷ Brian Morris, "The Topography of R. S. Thomas", *Miraculous Simplicity* 56.

¹⁸ KJV Matt. 9:17: "Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved".

¹⁹ "Probings", *Miraculous Simplicity* 12.

and the environment in which he writes. For this reason, it will be important that we discuss at some length the background of the poems written at Eglwys-fach before moving on to a detailed analysis of what we are ultimately after: the crystals, the unique shapes, the style.

Eglwys-fach: A Cramped Womb

I have looked long at this land
 Trying to understand
 My place in it—why,
 With each fertile country
 So free of its room,
 This was the cramped womb
 At last took me in
 From the void of unbeing.
 (“Those Others” T 31)

In his important book *Internal Difference: Literature in 20th Century Wales*, M. Wynn Thomas coins two “syndromes” which help illuminate R. S. Thomas’s poetry of the sixties. Drawing on experiences in the poet’s life, he calls these “the disappearing clergyman syndrome” and “the black fly syndrome”. These shed light on what he sees as “the two most important concerns of R. S. Thomas’s poetry during the sixties; fears that correspond to the double threat of collapse [of Wales] from within and invasion [of Wales] from without”.²¹ In this same spirit, one wishes to suggest two alternate (and perhaps related) “syndromes” that will illuminate the poetry of the Eglwys-fach period: the “claustrophobic vicar syndrome” and the “barrier syndrome”. The first of these corresponds to R. S. Thomas’s need for space and separateness, the second to the lengths he goes to in order to protect his imaginative vision of an ideal Wales. In suggesting these “syndromes”, one categorically does not wish to ascribe some kind of neurosis to R. S. Thomas or to contribute to the above-mentioned clichés about his reclusiveness. Rather, one wishes to illustrate, by means of invented categories, the very

²¹ *Internal Difference* 108.

real emotional factors that cause Thomas's poetry to increase in both introspectiveness and social awareness, developments which shape the style of his poems.

R. S. Thomas arrived in Eglwys-fach in 1954. The previous vicar had retired, and Thomas was ready for a change. He had grown tired of the cold, upland winters and the "miserly" and "worldly" farmers of Manafon, who "had an interest in the land and the animals, but [. . .] had little enthusiasm for things Welsh, cultural and the like" (A 62). Thomas was by this time a Welsh speaker—accomplished enough that he had published a number of prose pieces in Welsh—and his continual desire to lead what he saw as a more authentically-Welsh life had led him to look for a vacancy in a Welsh-speaking parish. The appointment was made, and Thomas was optimistic. Despite the unromantic realities of Manafon life, so very different from "the true Wales of [his] imagination" (A 10), Thomas's vision of a "true Wales" remained; "the old *biraeth* [. . .] was always simmering within him" (A 62), and Thomas believed that he might more fully realize himself as a Welshman in Eglwys-fach, a place where he could "give a sermon in Welsh every Sunday" and live as part of a Welsh-speaking community (A 62). Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that Thomas anticipated this move as a kind of release (one is tempted to use the word "escape") from the confines of Manafon.

In the prose, when Thomas writes about the natural beauty of the Welsh hills, he commonly adopts a tone of openness, expansiveness and depth through which he connects with history and holiness. In settings where the hills stretch out under the clouds, "spread[ing] out in a long wave", Thomas imagines "hidden audiences [that] wait to be addressed", and "time is enormous" ("The Mountains" SP 74-5). Thomas writes that in one such setting, namely Maes-yr-Onnen, a remote chapel in Radnorshire set amongst the expanse of field and sky, he experienced a religious vision so unrestrained and far-reaching that he "could comprehend the breadth and length and depth and height of the mystery of creation" ("Two Chapels" SP 37). Yet it is fascinating that this

sense of spaciousness and depth is almost entirely absent from the early poetry (though it does enter later). Certainly Thomas did not find any expansiveness in Manafon, which he describes as a “small village” with “smallholdings” and, in particular, narrow-minded people, whose “horizons [. . .] lay no further than the far side of the slope of the valley where they lived” (A 52-3). Prytherch and his kind are confined to their fields, to an acre of land, fenced-in, often visible only through an open gate or a gap in the hedge. Indeed, the sense of expansiveness exists almost exclusively in prose, and then only when the poet is able to escape the confines of the village:

But the rector would sometimes climb to the hilltops, and from one of their peaks a completely different world would open out in front of him. To the north-west, Cadair Idris was to be seen; to the north, Aran Fawddwy and Aran Benllyn, and to the north-east Y Berwyn – a prospect sufficient to raise the heart and make the blood sing. Turning to look down at the valley he would see everything in perspective, the people like ants below him [. . .]. (A 53)

This passage, which might appear to be the romantic sentiments of a keen walker, is in reality a description of the origins of the “claustrophobic vicar syndrome”. In fact, one detects a sense of *relief* running beneath this passage. The smallness of Manafon—a hollow surrounded by hills, a place where everyone knew the details of everyone else’s life—was at times stifling and overwhelming to Thomas.²² But when he could rise above it and distance himself from its inhabitants, there was a sense of liberation. The fact that he views the residents as small as ants is telling. As we will see, Thomas could get nearer than this to people and still live a life in tune with his ideals, but not much nearer. “I am essentially an *escapist*”, he tells Timothy Wilson, “a countryman seeking the semi-seclusion of Nature”.²³ One does not wish to paint Thomas as a misanthrope, but the poet’s

²² This feeling comes out very clearly in a prose passage from *Y I Llybrau Gynf*: “This interest in one another’s work and affairs was innate. [. . .] As I would be leaving the doorway of some farm, the woman of the house would say, ‘Ho, Meri, Tŷ Brith, has already done her washing.’ [. . .] When someone went round to collect money for a good cause, they would scrutinize his collection book to see how much so and so had contributed. If a farmer with a hundred acres had given ten shillings, a farmer with fifty acres would give five. It was as simple as that” (A 12).

²³ *Guardian* 15 September 1972, 8, italics added.

imaginative vision depended on quiet meditation and values that were rooted in the natural world; the presence of too many people—especially people who brought “their transistor radios” and “the plastic world” into nature’s “quietness and beauty”—could stifle that vision.²⁴ Perhaps not surprisingly, Thomas tells J. B. Lethbridge, “The only hope for any kind of future on this earth, it seems to me, is to gradually thin out the population”.²⁵

Thomas, however, was optimistic about Eglwys-fach, where he hoped to find people he *could* be close to because they shared his ideals. Amongst such people, Thomas might live a version of the communal life he had imagined as a young curate, a life he did not enjoy in Manafon. What he found in Eglwys-fach, however, was something entirely at odds with his vision of a communal Wales. In fact, most of the residents of Eglwys-fach were not Welsh at all:

What he didn’t know before settling there was how weak the Welsh language was in Eglwys-fach. It was a parish of several large houses, and every one of them in the hands of the English, despite the Welsh names on almost all of them. (A 64)

In his determination to redefine himself as a Welshman, Thomas had sought to distance himself from his bourgeois, English upbringing. Finding himself once again confronted by middle-class society and its values, he found them exceedingly distasteful, and “Eglwys-fach turned out to be a profound, at times desolating, disappointment”.²⁶ The English in Eglwys-fach, many of whom had military or colonial backgrounds, were used to getting their own way and stamping their own vision on places, including on the Church. Thomas did not care for them or their ways. Writing about them decades later,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “R. S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge” 43. Thomas makes this comment in the context of discussing humanity’s destructive nature, not its loudness or oppressiveness, but the comment follows hard upon his discussion of man as a fallen creature *and* a discussion of his own mistrust in others. We are therefore not taking his comment entirely out of context.

²⁶ Brown, R. S. *Thomas* 40.

in *The Echoes Return Slow*, a tone of animosity and distaste survives intact, indicating the depth of Thomas's original antipathy:

When the English colonise a parish, a vicar's is chaplain's work...officers' mess, receptions. He lied about his ability to play Bridge, but social occasions required at least his inability to circulate. To whom must a priest confess scurrilous thoughts? (52)²⁷

Unwilling to kow-tow to English "colonise[rs]" and their attitudes, Thomas also had no patience for the Welsh that did.

In fact, it is important to note that it was not just Eglwys-fach that Thomas felt outside of. He quickly learned that he was also out of sync with the values, diversions, and goings-on of the Welsh in a wider sense:

I'm very much the minority in this, but people think that it's possible to be an individual Welshman, speaking Welsh and looking at television, going to bingo and doing football pools and driving around in their Cortinas and all this sort of thing, I don't think so; I've no use for that sort of existence [. . .].²⁸

A poignant illustration of the division that existed between Thomas's values and the realities of contemporary Wales can be found in the 4 March 1964 edition of *The Guardian*, which contains what is surely one of the most extraordinary juxtapositions ever to appear in its pages. On page nine, the broadsheet is divided in half by a photograph of R. S. Thomas, "the poet of Eglwysfach". It is a striking, stern R. S. Thomas one sees, walking down a Welsh hillside, his clerical collar visible beneath a long, heavy, well-worn field coat. To the left of the photograph is Benedict Nightingale's piece, "Flewer of Verses", which paints both R. S. Thomas and his poetry as austere works of stone, seemingly hewn from Welsh rock. Nightingale quotes Thomas as saying, among other isolationist things, "I don't mix well with people". To the right of the photograph is an article by Arthur Hopcraft which carefully details the latest phenomenon in British

²⁷ Thomas also writes about what he saw as military coercion in *Neb*: "The worst ones for [trying to bring down the vicar] are officers of the armed forces, and fate plays into their hands since in the armed forces the chaplain is subordinate to them in rank. [. . .] And since R. S. saw Christ's message as a totally pacifist one, trouble was sure at some time to raise its head" (475).

²⁸ "R. S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge" 36-7.

favoured wildness, sought out places where he could, as he later described it, “evacuate the ear of the echoes of cloying Amens” (*ERS* 56). For R. S. Thomas, a congregation did not equate to a community. A claustrophobic vicar could still feel very much alone.

One could argue, in fact, that the chief obstacle to Thomas’s communal vision was his own nature, his “lonely, uncertain self”.³¹ He refers to the comfort of separateness as “the old ‘loner’ tendency”, one that began in his boyhood and made him “awkward in society”.³² In principle, Thomas had longed for closeness with his fellow countrymen and countrywomen from the beginning. In practice, he was apprehensive, even suspicious, of people:

[. . .] you know, no man is a hero to his valet, and you can’t live in a community where everybody knows everybody else’s history and business and so on, and of course the more you know about people the less admirable they are. [. . .] As I say, I’ve heard about some of these great human beings that have passed through the world, but I’ve not met them. I suppose it’s a pity, so that I don’t trust them.³³

That R. S. Thomas did not trust people raises a number of interesting issues. Trust—in mankind, in himself, in God—was not part of Thomas’s temperament, and one can easily see how a “lonely, uncertain self”, a man unsure of his own identity, had trouble trusting or loving or having faith: “What we can certainly suggest is that a self that is insecure in its identity is more likely to close protectively against the outside world, unwilling to render itself more vulnerable”.³⁴ This tendency to “close protectively” is what we will call the “barrier syndrome”: Thomas’s need to erect partitions, fences, hedges, windows and doors—all fortifications that safeguard his ideals and his tenuous identity from whatever might compromise them.

mind: “I could be bounded within a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams” *Hamlet* II, ii.

³¹ Barbara Prys-Williams, *Twentieth Century Autobiography* 147.

³² “Probings” 36.

³³ “R. S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge” 41.

³⁴ Brown, *R. S. Thomas* 98.

R. S. Thomas kept separate from the inhabitants of Eglwys-fach, indeed from contemporary Wales as a whole, as much as he could. He eventually withdrew from it altogether. And, paradoxically, withdrawal becomes the very means whereby Thomas approaches his poetic subjects. Or rather does *not* approach them, for when reading Thomas's work of this period, one quickly identifies the primary symptom of the barrier syndrome: in order for something, or someone, to hold the poet's interest, let alone his admiration, that subject must be kept at a comfortable distance. Again, "The more you know about people the less admirable they are". When the subject comes too close, Thomas's emotional reaction falls somewhere along a spectrum between unease and annoyance, even disgust:

Branwen was the Helen of Wales, wasn't she? Many of us, I'm sure, hold an image of her in our hearts [. . .]. There are still a few Branwens in Wales. Did I not hear the name once and turn, thinking she might steal my heart away? Who did I see but a stupid, mocking slut, her dull eyes made blue by daubings of mascara—a girl to whom Wales was no more than a name fast becoming *obsolete*.

("Abercuawg" *SP* 125)

Although a slightly later example (1976), this passage from Thomas's famous lecture functions well as an illustration of the barrier syndrome and how severe, even malicious and offensive, its symptoms can be. The poet perceives the subject as someone who does not share his ideals—indeed, makes her into a symbol of a Wales that, by losing touch with its past and its true nature, *mocks* his ideals—and this perception, accurate or not, leads to aversion. The barrier is created through denunciation and rejection. Thomas keeps this "false" Branwen at arm's length by *making* her false, thus protecting the "image [. . .] in [his] heart". The ideal Wales is kept out of reach. It is preserved by being reserved.

We find this idea of preservation in "The View From the Window" (*PS* 27), where Wales itself is idealized and kept behind a barrier. It is metaphorically a piece of art, kept behind glass: "Like a painting it is set before one, / But less brittle, ageless". In

this setting, all that is potentially negative can be “healed by sunlight”. Wales is safe, preserved, and unmarred by “the smell / Of decay” (“Reservoirs” *NBF* 26). But if the barrier is compromised, the view is corrupted. “The Small Window” (*NBF* 38) establishes a boundary between the observing poet and the observed subject, but more importantly, it also illustrates the idea of preservation by reservation, establishing a boundary between the poet’s ideals and those who besmirch those ideals by touching something they cannot understand or appreciate:

In Wales there are jewels
 To gather, but with the eye
 Only. A hill lights up
 Suddenly; a field trembles
 With colour and goes out
 In its turn; in one day
 You can witness the extent
 Of the spectrum and grow rich

With looking. Have a care;
 This wealth is for the few
 And chosen. Those who crowd
 A small window dirty it
 With their breathing, though sublime
 And inexhaustible the view.

The line break between the second and third lines—eye/only—forces the reader to pause between “eye” and “only”, emphasizing that it is by observation alone, not by means of any physical contact, that Wales’s “jewels” are gatherable. And these “jewels”, it is clear, are to be found in the landscape. There is no mention of the Welsh *people* as “jewels”. A similar, yet more dramatic, technique is used between the first and second stanzas, where Thomas uses both a line break and a stanza break to again emphasize the act of observation: “grow rich // *With looking*”. Again, this is a detached, non-tactile, non-invasive appreciation. Significantly, the line break is *itself* a barrier, an example of form mirroring content. It also hints at Thomas’s ideal, implying that the “riches” of Wales are its natural beauties; it is not a place in which people should grow rich by means of intrusive exploitation or depletion of those natural resources. Immediately following

this prosodic barrier, the poet shifts the tone dramatically, establishing yet another barrier, an emotional one, by introducing the imperative, “Have a care”. The “sublime” view, we learn, can be compromised by crowding. This imperative has most often been read as a warning to outsiders. Wintle, for example, calls the poem “a vortex of political passion”, arguing that the Old Testament connotations of the word “chosen” make Wales into “a paradise reserved for some and denied all others [. . .] according to birth and provenance”.³⁵ And while it is true that there *is* a demonstrable relationship between the barrier syndrome and Thomas’s public poems, Wintle’s reading is limited. It does not take into account the fact that R. S. Thomas was himself an outsider, an onlooker, and subject to a continual identity crisis. Nor does it take into account the claustrophobic vicar syndrome. Rather than focus exclusively on the word “chosen”, one must also consider the word “few”, for it is the crowd itself, the “cramped womb” as it were, more than the nationality of that crowd that makes Thomas uncomfortable. The poem excludes not just the non-Welsh, but those Cortina-driving, bingo-playing, mascara-smearing Welsh as well, so that the creation of barriers is also a “self-preserving attempt to keep his distance from his own kind”.³⁶ In truth, R. S. Thomas was every bit as uncomfortable in a Welsh crowd as he was in an English one. He was “equally estranged from the speakers of both languages” because neither crowd shared his values.³⁷

Perhaps an even better example of the barrier syndrome is the poem “On the Shore” (BT 29):

No nearer than this;
 So that I can see their shapes,
 And know them human
 But not who they are;
 So that I can hear them speak,
 The familiar accent,
 But not what they say.

³⁵ *Furious Interiors* 17.

³⁶ M. Wynn Thomas, *Internal Difference* 120.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 121.

To be nearer than this;
 To look into their eyes
 And know the colour of their thought;
 To paddle in their thin talk—
 What is the beach for?
 I watch them through the wind's pane,
 Nameless and dear.

As in “The Small Window”, we find a window (“the wind’s pane”) acting as a barrier between the observer and the observed, and again Thomas makes the intent of that window very clear: it is safety glass. It keeps the speaker from actual interaction with those on the beach. It is not Wales that is being preserved, but one Welshman in particular. The adjectives “nameless” and “dear” are related; by pairing them on the same line, and by ending the poem with them, Thomas emphasizes the idea that those on the beach are dear *because* they are nameless, their talk tolerable *because* their words are indecipherable. Indeed, the beach itself, not merely the window of wind, acts as a barrier in the poem. “What is the beach for? Well, it is clearly for the avoidance of such disenchantment as comes from close encounters of several kinds with [Thomas’s] fellow countrymen and women”.³⁸

“Those Others” (T 31) is a poem that demonstrates the relationship between these two “syndromes”. As he looks at the land, “trying to understand / [His] place in it”, Thomas wonders why, “with each fertile country / So free of its room”, it was the “cramped womb” of Wales that “took [him] in”. This curious grammatical construction, “free of its room”, reveals a longing for space that is a symptom of the claustrophobic vicar syndrome. There is something of a pun here, or at least a creative ambiguity. On one hand “free of its room” can mean generous with space, giving freely and openhandedly. But alongside this meaning is the sense that these other places are in themselves wide-open, with room to spare, or at least they seem that way in the poet’s mind. This perception is influenced by the claustrophobic vicar syndrome; indeed, “On

³⁸ Ibid. 123.

the Shore” demonstrates what is by now obvious: the claustrophobic vicar syndrome *leads* to the barrier syndrome. Thomas’s longing for “freedom *of*”—that is, freedom of room and imagination and ideals—directly leads to a need for “freedom *from*”—*i.e.* freedom from those that do not share that vision or those ideals. Indeed, Thomas begins to hate those “men of the Welsh race / Who brood with dark face/ Over their thin navel / To learn what to sell” (“Those Others”), the Wales that is both materialistic and supine.

By now, then, it is also easy to see that the barrier syndrome is itself a symptom of Thomas’s perpetual status as an outsider, one that does not begin or end in Eglwys-fach. For example, this sense of being “other” affected earlier poems, where a clear social and cultural barrier existed between Thomas and the hill farmers:

I see his face pressed to the wind’s pane,
Staring with cold eyes: a country face
Without beauty, yet with the land’s trace
Of sadness, badness, madness.
(“The Face” T 17)

In fact, Iago Prytherch, as an icon, only *functions* at a distance, indeed when some barrier—the wind’s pane, a hedge, a fence, the rain’s bars, a field—*keeps* him at a distance.³⁹ And as we will examine in the next chapter, this is also the case when the mythic Machine and God Himself enter the poems. They serve the poet well only when kept at a distance, spoken of but not described in detail. A similar tension—between a desire for community and the need for separateness—also exists in Thomas’s more overtly-religious poetry, where he desires closeness with God but requires silence and separateness when worshipping. In fact, much of the religious poetry can be seen as a

³⁹ It is intriguing to note, however, that Thomas’s rejection of the Eglwys-fach community actually strengthens his emotional connection with the Manafon farmers. In “Those Others” he writes that “There are still those other / Castaways on a sea / Of grass, who call to me, / Clinging to their doomed farms”. One notes that it is *not* shared ideals that create this sense of unanimity; rather, the connection is created through a shared separateness. The farmers are “other / Castaways”, implying that the poet is also a “castaway”. The word “other”, emphasized by its terminal position in the line, connects them. Thomas felt estranged from the Manafon farmers, but to the degree that those farmers are connected to the past and to the natural world, and are therefore separate from modern Wales, they too are “other”.

tension between, on one hand, accepting the barriers as a necessary part of worship and, on the other, overcoming the barriers, a process Thomas describes as “the annihilation of difference” (“Emerging” *LS* 1). The irony, however, is that in those poems, it is *God*, not the speaker, who is creating the barrier (although one could argue that the anxiety to be in touch with God creates a barrier because it causes the rational self to conceive of God in inappropriate ways). The poet longs for oneness, a lack of barriers. And yet, just as Thomas’s imaginative vision requires separateness, his worship requires a silence that comes only in isolation.

When discussing these “syndromes”, however, it is important not to paint R. S. Thomas merely as a victim of circumstance. He can certainly paint himself this way, describing himself as one born lost, deprived of his birthright, born too late to experience the Wales of his dreams. But one must also emphasize that R. S. Thomas’s separateness was ultimately a choice, one that is perhaps most clearly illustrated in one of his best-known poems of this period, “A Welshman at St. James’s Park” (*P* 23):

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

I am not one
Of the public. I have come a long way
To realise it. Under the sun’s
Feathers are the sinews of stone,
The curved claws.

I think of a Welsh hill
That is without fencing, and the men,
Bosworth blind, who left the heather
And the high pastures of the heart. I fumble
In the pocket’s emptiness; my ticket
Was in two pieces. I kept half.

This poem is most often seen as a choice that amounts to self-definition, where R. S. Thomas rejects a very English domestication in favour of “the high pastures of the

heart”, which are wilder, uncultivated, and more essentially Welsh. St. James’s Park is of course in the immediate vicinity of Buckingham Palace, Horse Guards Parade, the War Rooms, Downing Street, and the Houses of Parliament. It is at the very heart of the British state. The poem is therefore politically and nationalistically tinged, and the notices to act in accordance with regulations suggest the authoritative officialdom of a constraining capital. Thus, when the speaker retains the half of his ticket that will return him to Wales, he is in one sense symbolically turning his back on the constraints and regulations of English imperialism. But Thomas’s decision takes on a larger, and ultimately more complex, significance when viewed in light of the claustrophobic vicar syndrome and the barrier syndrome. The birds of the poem, for example, have been “seduced” by the promise of bread, only to be tamed, robbed of their essential character, by their seducers. Thomas often describes the Welsh in similar terms, as having sold their birthright and their culture. Ward believes that “the occasion [of the poem] was surely when Thomas paid a rare visit to London in 1964 to receive the Queen’s Gold Medal for poetry”.⁴⁰ Thomas would, in fact, subsequently describe the whole experience of receiving the medal as a bit of a hoodwinking, so the verb “seduced” seems to fit with Ward’s reading.⁴¹ But whether or not Ward is correct, domestication is clearly not natural to those birds, and it was not natural to R. S. Thomas, who maintained his own integrity through separateness from the “public”.⁴² There is a suggestion of wildness in the image of the birds’ “curved claws” and, due to a line break and an indentation, the image of those claws sits directly atop the poem’s next word: “I”. The image of wildness is thus associated with the speaker spatially. It is also the trigger that sends the speaker into a

⁴⁰ *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas* 83.

⁴¹ “Probings” 31.

⁴² It is worth noting that a substantial portion of Thomas’s diction probably comes from the signs at St. James’s Park. Presently there are two different signs on the fencing between the walkways and the grass. The first reads: “PLEASE DO NOT ENTER. This area is set aside for wildlife. It is not maintained for *public access*” (italics added), and the second reads: “PLEASE DO NOT FEED THE WILDLIFE IN THIS AREA, DUE TO DAMAGE TO THE GRASS. PLEASE USE ADJACENT GRAVEL AREA”.

visionary state. And what is extremely revealing is the image that first comes into the poet's mind when he enters this dream-like state: "a Welsh hill / *without fencing*". While this brief prepositional phrase may seem relatively insignificant, it is crucial to the poem. Quite simply, there is no barrier syndrome in R. S. Thomas's idyllic visions of Wales; indeed, there are no barriers at all. Even in England's most claustrophobic city ("Cities are terrible places. Evil. I smell evil the moment I get off the train"⁴³), dreams are unrestrained, and "the high pastures of the heart" can be as expansive as the sky between Cadair Idris and Y Berwyn. But this can only happen in the poet's imagination. When vision gives way to perceived reality, Thomas is very aware of the fencing which constrains and, when faced with those who threaten his vision, welcomes a fencing which protects.

This contrast, between a visionary Wales and the reality of Eglwys-fach, brought R. S. Thomas to a painful realization: his early, idyllic visions of Wales would not find their counterpart in the literal Wales around him. Indeed, the more one reads his work, the more one realizes that R. S. Thomas's "true" Wales could indeed only exist in his dreams. Realizing this, Thomas "began to internalize the dream for even safer keeping [. . .] substituting for the upland farms around Manafon his own, internal 'high pastures of the heart'".⁴⁴ Having recently sought to surmount estrangement by "rooting" his poems (and vicariously himself) in the Welsh landscape through a process of Cymrification, Thomas now accepts that any "rooting" of the self in an ideal Wales, indeed *any* escape from estrangement, any unity,⁴⁵ must take place *within* the self. R. S. Thomas would eventually find the place of his "birthright", that "society [. . .] which was

⁴³ Marianne Macdonald, "Biographers: they can go to hell", *Independent on Sunday* 25 September 1994.

⁴⁴ M. Wynn Thomas, *Internal Difference* 120.

⁴⁵ Thomas eventually addresses the idea of unity directly in a lecture by the same name (*Undod* [Unity] SP 143-58). Thomas divides the lecture into three parts: *The Unity of Being*, *The Unity of Humankind*, and *The Unity of Wales*. For R. S. Thomas, none of these ideas was separable from the others.

truly and essentially Welsh”,⁴⁶ but he would find it where it had always existed: in his imagination. He would call it “Abercuawg”, the creation of which fulfilled an imaginative need, namely a place for the *displaced*. Rogers is correct in asserting that for Thomas, “Each parish was weighed in the balance and found wanting”,⁴⁷ but Rogers, who at times depicts Thomas’s life as something of a black comedy sketch featuring a travelling, pernickety priest, fails to suitably address the ideology behind Thomas’s westward migration.⁴⁸ In short, R. S. Thomas is himself the culmination of the barrier syndrome. He *becomes* the barrier that protects his ideals from the outside world. To paraphrase the New Testament, the kingdom of Wales is within him. And it is ultimately this shift, this change from an external subject matter and topography to a more introspective, *internalized* landscape, that creates a need for, and leads to the development of, R. S. Thomas’s definitive style.

An Inseparable Union

It is an inseparable union this marriage of sense and sound, of content and technique, and that is why I am against those reviewers and columnists who pick out a bit of subject matter and say, “You know, R. S. Thomas is a poet who writes about country matters and that sort of thing”. It is so very sweeping and so inadequate [. . .]. There is nothing to show the poetic excellencies or some of the little achievements of that poet in expressing in a way which no other person who is not a poet could express.

(From “The Making of a Poem” *SP* 86-7)

In the above excerpt, R. S. Thomas expresses a perpetual frustration. If we agree with Thomas that poetry is “an inseparable union [. . .] of content and technique”, or if we can at least agree that such a union was centrally important to R. S. Thomas, then the meaning of an R. S. Thomas poem (indeed any poem) should be more than an idea or theme that can be squeezed out, carefully paraphrased, and set down as prose. As

⁴⁶ Williams, “The Topography of R. S. Thomas” 56.

⁴⁷ *The Man Who Went Into the West* 189.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Thomas tells Lethbridge, “Whenever one falls to talking about these things in prose, one becomes conscious that the chief motivation of a poet is to write a poem”.⁴⁹ Surely the poem *as* poem—that is, as a verbal, spatial, lineated structure—*creates* meaning by being something, not merely by being *about* something. And, as we have already demonstrated, it also creates meaning by *doing* something, by acting upon the reader. According to Hartman, “The prosody of a poem is the poet’s method of controlling the reader’s temporal experience of the poem, especially his attention to that experience”.⁵⁰ This definition is appropriate to Thomas’s linear prosody, which he uses to maintain and direct the reader’s attention.

As we have already observed to a degree, a change in Thomas’s “subject matter” always brings with it a corresponding change in style, and this continues to be the case at Eglwys-fach. Of course there is no “barrier syndrome stanza” or “claustrophobic vicar verse form”, but these syndromes, as we have discussed, turn Thomas inward. His subject is increasingly his own emotional interior: his need for separateness, his contempt for the bourgeoisie and English influence, his dissatisfaction with modern Wales and the modern world, his growing spiritual concerns, and his own loneliness. Accordingly, the style of the poems evolves to track the poet’s emotional and cognitive processes, and in this sense it does, in fact, demonstrate apartness. Perhaps not coincidentally, the style is also separate, apart, from the mainstream of British poetry, as we will see.

What is perhaps most immediately apparent about the style of the poems written at Eglwys-fach, when they are viewed within a developmental context, is how substantially they differ from the poems of the Manafon period. In the previous chapter, we discussed the “characteristic tonalities” of the Manafon poetry, which include an accentual prosody that features “stress clusters” (often used to accentuate tactile nouns and “root” the poem in a physical location), frequent alliteration and assonance

⁴⁹ “R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge” 37.

⁵⁰ Charles Hartman. *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 13.

(including elements of traditional Welsh prosody), and various uses of rhyme (vowel rhyme, internal rhyme, and end-rhyme). The poems of the Eglwys-fach period, while they do not immediately, or altogether, abandon these elements, quickly evolve, and the changes are evident as early as *Poetry for Supper* (1958). Generally speaking, one can characterize the changes in the poems as follows: they are more musically subtle than their predecessors, with less end-rhyme and internal rhyme; their lines are typically shorter, with fewer accented syllables; and, increasingly, they are written in a frequently-enjambed free verse.

This last development, one that, as we will see, owes much to Thomas's reading of American poetry, as well as his continued response to Edward Thomas, is the most significant stylistic development of Thomas's career. Having already laid aside accentual-syllabic prosody in favour of accentual prosody, Thomas now begins to favour a linear prosody, one which is "linear" in two ways:

- 1) Lineation, and in particular the specific placement of line breaks within grammatical phrases, replaces accentuation as the primary prosodic tool for directing the reader's experience of a poem. Thomas's line breaks frequently cut across syntax, creating an interplay between lineation and grammar, a practice that prosodists have referred to as "counterpoint",⁵¹ "grammetrics",⁵² and "syncopation" (we will use the term "counterpoint").⁵³ Thomas uses this interplay to create tension, surprise the reader, and subvert expectations.
- 2) The poems are "linear" in a sequential sense. Thomas uses lineation to create *momentum*. Lines are unhindered by the frequent stresses and "stress clusters" that (intentionally) slowed down the poet's earlier, more metrical lines. Rather than using stress to accentuate key images or elements throughout the poem, Thomas's lines trace the poem's emotional movement and the speaker's thought processes, and lineation drives the reader toward the end of the

⁵¹ Hartman, *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* 25. According to Hartman, when lineation and syntax—or, for that matter, "multiple rhythmic patterns" of any kind—"stand in conflict", that conflict, or tension, creates meaning.

⁵² Donald Wesling, *The Scissors of Meter: Grammetrics and Reading* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996). Grammetrical theory, though it has many facets and applications, is essentially the interplay between rhythm and syntax. Although Wesling's study is the more recent, he is extending to free verse the ideas of Peter Wexler, who coined the term "grammetrics" in "On the Grammetrics of the Classical Alexandrine", *Cahiers de Lexicologie* 4 (1964): 61-72.

⁵³ Alan Holder, *Rethinking Meter* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1995) 58. Holder prefers "syncopation" to "counterpoint" or "tension".

poem, where there is typically some kind of “landing” or “settling” (if not resolution).

Because this linear, non-metrical prosody does not call attention to itself with overt ornamentation—“there is not the ring of achieved song as there was earlier”⁵⁴—the poems seem less like structured *representations* of experience and more like experience itself, inextricable from the movement and processes of the speaker’s thoughts and feelings.⁵⁵ As Derek Attridge points out,

By not wholly engaging with meter [. . .] poems cannot avail themselves of its full capacity for expressive and memorable shapings of sound, but they may gain a heightened ability to capture the movements of thoughts, speech, and feeling that run through our daily lives.⁵⁶

R. S. Thomas’s need for a prosody capable of “captur[ing] the movements of thoughts, speech, and feeling” stems from the increasingly-introspective nature of the Eglwys-fach poetry. While the Manafon poetry is certainly reactive, it is not always reflective; that is, the poems frequently take the form of direct responses to *external* stimuli. In contrast, the Eglwys-fach poetry, as we have seen, is usually further removed from any external person, event, or geographical setting. The “claustrophobic vicar syndrome” and the “barrier syndrome” both lead Thomas away from the public; he creates barriers, both physical and emotional, between himself and a Wales that does not share his ideals. As a result, the topography of the poems moves “beyond those of the physical and exterior” and into the emotional and mental processes of the poet himself, “the interior and ultimate components of being”.⁵⁷ Thomas’s earlier, stress-heavy, metrical poetry, while it was well-suited to tactile descriptions of actions in the external world, such as “chipping

⁵⁴ Ward, *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas* 62.

⁵⁵ One is reminded of a quotation from Adrienne Rich, a poet, it is worth noting, Thomas would have read at Eglwys-fach, in the journal *Critical Quarterly*: “Instead of poems *about* experiences I am getting poems that *are* experiences, that contribute to my knowledge and my emotional life even while they reflect and assimilate it” (“Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading” [1960], *Strong Words* 142).

⁵⁶ *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: U of Cambridge P 1995) 176.

⁵⁷ Christopher Morgan, *R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity* 25.

the green skin”,⁵⁸ could not adequately mirror the interior world—the complex, shifting, “green / Darkness”⁵⁹ of the “green asylum”.⁶⁰ The style simply had to evolve.

Thus, by the late-1950s, R. S. Thomas was moving beyond the “hybrid” style we discussed at the end of the last chapter and was increasingly writing in free verse, and by the time he left Eglwys-fach in 1972, he had, in terms of practical technique, abandoned syllabic prosody and end-rhyme altogether. While it is true that some of the poems written at Eglwys-fach still feature rhyme, the majority of these use rhyme intermittently, or in non-traditional patterns, and even these seem outmoded in the midst of a recurrent free verse that continually fights against metrical conventions, continually threatening to displace it. Conceivably, one could conclude that the poet’s movement away from metre and rhyme equates to a lesser focus on poetic formality. In actuality, however, just the opposite is true. Perhaps more than in any other developmental period, style is very much on Thomas’s mind at Eglwys-fach. This is illustrated primarily by the poetry itself, but also by statements like the following: “I feel now, in middle life, that it is the actual *craft* of poetry which is important, and I think this must be said and adhered to” (“The Making of a Poem” *SP* 86).

To help us better appreciate the different (yet related) threads of development during this period, the remainder of this chapter is divided into four sub-sections: “Free Verse”, “Edward Thomas”, “American Poetry”, and “Public Poetry”. Because Thomas increasingly found that the “craft of poetry” led him to free verse, it will be beneficial to begin with a brief overview of free verse, including some of the inherent problems in defining it. We will also look at the role prosody plays as readers make associations (not always accurately) between R. S. Thomas and his poetic persona. As we progress to an even closer analysis of Thomas’s free verse, we will examine his response to stylistic

⁵⁸ “A Peasant” (*SF* 14).

⁵⁹ “This to Do” (*P* 12).

⁶⁰ “Song” (*JYT* 62).

models, beginning with his renewed response to Edward Thomas and then progressing to a discussion of his reaction to the American poetry he encountered in the journal *Critical Quarterly*. Following this examination, we will break down the stylistic properties of the public poetry, which is quite unlike the personal, introspective verse of the period and ultimately less successful as poetry.

Free Verse

There is no universally-accepted definition of “free verse”, and analyzing the various schools of thought would be a thesis unto itself. It could be argued that, generally speaking, the free verse landscape in America was colonized by Walt Whitman and populated by the descendants of William Carlos Williams, with several factions breaking off and starting their own societies. But for our present purposes, an illustrative definition can be approached by looking to T. S. Eliot, a poet who, through his loosening of traditional form, brought free verse into the mainstream. Publicly, Eliot was inclined to back away from the whole concept of *verse libre*, yet in doing so, he actually gave us what are now its most commonly-cited definitions. In 1942—the same year R. S. Thomas moved to Manafon, but years before the rector would begin to write consistently in free verse—Eliot famously argued that “no verse is free for the man that wants to do a good job”.⁶¹ And as early as 1917 Eliot was writing that “freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation”.⁶² According to Eliot, “If *vers libre* is a genuine verse-form it will have a positive definition. And I can define it only in negatives: (1) absence of pattern, (2) absence of rhyme, (3) absence of metre”.⁶³ These two arguments, namely that free verse isn’t formless verse, and that free verse is easier to define by what it is not (*e.g.* metrical) than what it is, still

⁶¹ T. S. Eliot, “The Music of Poetry”, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York; Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957) 31.

⁶² “Reflections on *Vers Libre*” *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953) 90.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

appear in most poetry textbooks. In *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, for example, Paul Fussell makes both arguments, asserting, on one hand, that poets who do not write metrical poetry “tend to compensate by employing another kind of pattern”⁶⁴ and, on the other, that “The free verse poem establishes a texture without metrical regularity [. . .]. And most free verse poems eschew rhyme as well”.⁶⁵

Such axioms can be puzzling because they are seemingly contradictory. Free verse poems must be written in some kind of non-prose pattern, a discernible *form*, in order to qualify as verse, yet poems are only described as free verse when they do *not* ascribe to traditional formal patterns. Critics usually escape this paradox by requiring a free verse poem to establish its own prosody, to set its own rules, with the caveat that the form should be appropriate to the content. As Thomas argues above, there should be an “inseparable union [. . .] of content and technique”. This marriage of form and content is sometimes referred to as “open form” or “organic form”. The latter term comes from Coleridge, who argued that *organic* (as opposed to *mechanic*) form “shapes, as it develops, itself from within”.⁶⁶ And yet Coleridge was still writing metrical poetry, almost exclusively in pentameter; in fact, he maintained that “metre” is “the proper form for poetry, and poetry [is] imperfect and defective without metre”.⁶⁷ There was simply no historical or social precedent for a non-metrical prosody during the Romantic period. In contrast, “The period style in contemporary prosody [. . .] does not emerge out of precisely identifiable historical or social circumstances but rather reflects an aesthetic mood”.⁶⁸ In other words, the concept of “form” itself has changed to the point where a form is no longer just selected or adapted, but can be invented; form is whatever answers

⁶⁴ *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* 79.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 77.

⁶⁶ From “Shakespeare’s Judgment”, *Selections from the Prose Writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Henry Beers (New York: Henry Holt, 1893) 41.

⁶⁷ From “Biographia Literaria”, *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1854) 421.

⁶⁸ Harvey Gross, *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry* 305, italics added.

the demands of both content and personal perception. In William Carlos Williams's words, "We have no measure to guide ourselves except a purely intuitive one which we feel but do not name".⁶⁹

The concept of organic, or invented, form became synonymous with American free verse in the 1960s. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey's anthology *Naked Poetry* (1969) is probably the most widely-read anthology of American poets writing in non-metrical forms, and it is worth mentioning that the work of many of these poets appeared in *Critical Quarterly*. These poets preached the concepts of individuality and non-repeatable forms.⁷⁰ For example, Allen Ginsberg, who strongly influenced the British Underground Poets, discusses what happens when a poem is "transcribed to the page: page arrangement notates the thought stops, breath-stops, runs of inspiration, changes of mind, startings and stoppings of the car".⁷¹ William Stafford maintains the importance of not restricting "the cadence or pace or flow of the language", and he argues that "the *feel* of composition is more important than any rule or prescribed form"; "the writer is not restricted to intermittent requirements of sound repetition or variation: the writer or speaker enters a constant, never-ending flow and variation".⁷² W. S. Merwin's concept of free verse is perhaps the best known, and it most clearly argues that a poem's form should be organic, inimitable:

In an age where time and technique encroach hourly, or appear to, on the source itself of poetry, it seems as though what is needed for any particular nebulous unwritten hope that may become a poem is not a manipulable, more or less predictably recurring pattern, but an unduplicatable resonance, something that would be like an echo except that it is repeating no sound. Something that always belonged to it: its sense and information before it entered words.⁷³

⁶⁹ "On Measure—Statement for Cid Corman" (1954), *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* 85.

⁷⁰ *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms*, eds. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 222.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.* 270-71.

The phrase “an echo repeating no sound” has interesting applications for the religious poetry R. S. Thomas writes at Aberdaron and beyond, but in the context of the present discussion, the most important idea is that of “an unduplicatable resonance”. This is what American free verse has always prided itself on being: individual, unrepeatable, a declaration of independence. This concept, in fact, is now imbedded in all free verse poetry; it is part of its genealogy.

When prosody is this idiosyncratic, there is a natural consequence: a poet’s prosody becomes, at least on some level, a persona. This is true of all poetry since no two poets use form in precisely the same manner, but it is especially true in free verse which has surrounding it the air of inimitability. For all of our reasonable insistence that the poet and the poem are separate entities, the fact remains that if we remove the shared conventions of prosody,⁷⁴ then a poet’s prosodic predilections will appear to communicate, and often *will* communicate, something personal, leaving the reader with an impression not merely of the poem, but also of the poet. This is perhaps what Robert Lowell means when he says, “I’m sure the rhythm is the person himself”,⁷⁵ or what Ted Hughes has in mind when he describes poetry as “words that [. . .] express something of the deep complexity that makes us precisely the way we are”.⁷⁶ The first critic to put forward this correlation was Ford Madox Ford who, in 1914, argued in favour of *verse libre* because “that which is cut to a pattern must sacrifice a certain amount [. . .] of the personality of the writer”, and “inasmuch as the personality of the writer is still the chief

⁷⁴ This is, of course, debatable. One could argue that free verse is *not* simply a matter of individual inclination, that there *is* a free verse prosodic tradition in English (and, for that matter, in other languages), and that cultural, societal, and historical traditions do determine choices in free verse prosody. In a sense, the concept of inimitable form has itself become a tradition, although free verse also has as part of its genealogy a kind of rebelliousness, a tendency to thwart tradition. Indeed, the history of verse as a whole can be seen as a process of culturally-accepted patterns giving way to patterns that vary from the norm, and that at first seem highly irregular.

⁷⁵ Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, eds., *Conversations on the Craft of Poetry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston 1961) 33. Lowell’s comments are very similar to the words of Eighteenth-Century French naturalist George-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, who famously said, “Le Style est l’homme Même”, or “The style is the man himself”.

⁷⁶ “Words and Experience” (1967), *Strong Words* 157.

thing in a work of art, any form that will lead to the more perfect expression of personality is a form of the utmost value".⁷⁷ While disagreeing with Ford's premise that the writer's personality is "the chief thing" in poetry, one can agree that there is a strong correlation between poet and poem. Of course, one is quick to add that the *impression* of personality left by a poem's prosody is often quite different from the actual personality of the man or woman writing it. Peter McDonald accurately points out that "the merest smattering of literary biography will show that poets have written, and often still write, poetry which has more resource, complexity, and imagination than they could themselves demonstrate as men and women".⁷⁸ And he goes on to suggest, rightly, that it is in the poems themselves, their formal properties, not merely in "the personality they project" that we should find meaning.⁷⁹ And yet, while a poem can, and often does, create a persona quite unlike the poet who composes it, the fact remains that poems, perhaps especially free verse poems, *do* project a personality.

It is, in fact, the personality of R. S. Thomas that has gained the most critical attention. This is partly due to the personality projected by the poetry, but it is also very often a personality projected by reviewers, who are much less interested in the poetry itself than they are in the reputation of the poet, whom they are at pains to portray as a dour, misanthropic Welshman. But even if one were to disregard such characterizations, it would still be the case that no poet in Wales, not even Dylan Thomas, has been the subject of more personality-based criticism than R. S. Thomas. In general, we can define "personality criticism" as a brand of criticism that uses poetry primarily as a way of "getting to know" the poet, as opposed to getting to know the poems. Reading reviews and criticism on R. S. Thomas, one might readily discover how R. S. Thomas the man

⁷⁷ Ford Madox Ford, "Les Jeunes and *Des Imagistes*?" (1914), *Critical Essays*, ed. Max Saunders and Richard Stang (New York: NYU P, 2004) 158.

⁷⁸ *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority from Yeats to Hill* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) 5.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 5-6. Thomas hints at this same conclusion when he tells John Barnie that "a creative person must be so open to experience and impressions, so alert and critical of the ideas coming to him, that he is not conscious of his own existence as a person" ("Probings" 31-2).

(supposedly) felt about a great many things, including Iago Prytherch, Wales and the Welsh, England and the English, technology, materialism, science, God, birds, and the burning of holiday cottages. But even if we could (and we obviously cannot) set aside all poems where the speaker is not R. S. Thomas, thereby rendering his poetry entirely autobiographical, one inescapable flaw would remain with “personality criticism”: it nearly always marginalizes, and at times even neglects, the poetry.

Why *has* there been such a focus on the poet, rather than the poems? Thomas himself was partly to blame, having a penchant for what he called “a propagandistic intention”, which led him at times to use a poem as a way “of getting a particular message across” (“Words and the Poet” *SP* 64). Thomas believed this to be a weakness in his work. In his mind, “a pure poet” would not have let “the everyday world of noise and pain and evil” intrude into “the interior world of words and thought” as he often did (*SP* 64). One can agree with Thomas to the extent that his poems are not as powerful, or as well-received, when his forms appear to be mere vehicles for ideas. Yet these failures seem to occur not when “the everyday world”, or any other content for that matter, enters the poetry, but when the form of a given poem is *at odds* with its content, which tends to be the case in his more aggressive political poems, as we will see. But one is quick to point out that Thomas’s “messages”, to use his term, are best delivered by means of his well-crafted poetry, as opposed to his prose. For example, the poem “Depopulation of the Hills” (*AL* 14), with its memorable refrain (“Leave it, leave it”) and powerful enjambment (“The grass / Wrecked them in its draughty tides”), leaves the reader with a moving and memorable impression of deracinated upland workers, yet the related 1945 essay, “The Depopulation of the Welsh Hill Country” (*SP* 17-23), comes across flatly.⁸⁰ While both pieces arguably contain the same “message”, the poem—

⁸⁰ It must be said that R. S. Thomas’s prose, while important for the way it illuminates his poetry, rarely rises to the artistic level of that poetry. “The Mountains”, “Abercuawg”, and the prose passages in “The Echoes Return Slow” are rare exceptions.

situation. The “I” is letting the reader use his (the poet’s) “eye”, as it were.⁸³ The emotional effect of this poem would depend almost entirely on objective correlatives were it not for the initial pronoun. With an observer present, however, there is a mediator between the images and the reader. Unique descriptions like “holy mildew” and “skulls, / Ripening” are attached to the “I”; likewise, the class distinction between the clergymen and the “oafs and yokels” is an appraisal by the speaker. Thus, we imagine, and form an opinion about, the speaker based on his observations, and that opinion develops as we read the poem. The poem is therefore less a memorial to clergymen and their often thankless work in rural parishes than it is an expression of *the speaker’s* feelings about those clergymen. Even God’s corrective action in the last line is less about God than it is about the speaker’s belief in the need for corrective action. In other words, that single, seemingly insignificant “I” is in fact the poem’s most significant stylistic property. It is the first word in the first line, and whether accurately or not, all that follows becomes part of the speaker’s poetic persona. Again, this poem should not automatically, without question be heard as Thomas’s own *personal* voice. But the unidentified “I”, especially because it uses nouns—clergy, rectories, prayers, God—that were part of R. S. Thomas’s life, makes it difficult for the reader not to hear his voice. Indeed, Thomas uses the first person lyric so frequently that unless an alternate persona is clearly presented (as in, for example, “I am, as you know, Walter Llywarch”),⁸⁴ the reader, by default, assumes that the speaker is R. S. Thomas. For example, in “Dialectic” (T 26), which begins with the line, “I would make a clear statement”, the reader hears the voice of R. S. Thomas in all that follows.

The problems of persona and personality in Thomas’s poetry are compounded by one obvious fact: the speaker of an R. S. Thomas poem *is* often R. S. Thomas. He

⁸³ One might have written “his or her ‘eye’”, but again, readers of Thomas quickly learn to associate the speaking voice with the poet’s own persona, so using masculine pronouns to describe the speaker becomes habitual.

⁸⁴ “Walter Llywarch” (T 11).

frequently used similar themes, even similar words, in both poetry and prose; he often referred to his poems or used their language when giving his opinions in interviews; and some of his work, notably the poetry/prose hybrid volume *The Echoes Return Slow*, has usefully been interpreted by critics as an exercise in “poetic autobiography”.⁸⁵ Still, one must be cautious; reading Thomas’s work through a lens of presumptive autobiography can be problematic.⁸⁶ For instance, the poem “Acting” begins this way: “Being unwise enough to have married her / I never knew when she was not acting” (*H’m* 11). These lines, and indeed the entire poem that follows (including the quotation “I hate you”), does not sit well within the body of poems about Thomas’s wife, M. E. Eldridge; in fact, almost certainly the speaker of “Acting” is not R. S. Thomas at all. But the temptation to read his marital relationship into the poem is strong, largely because of the first-person persona. It is thus understandable why critics often focus on the poet: the *poems themselves* are often focused on the speaker, who is often a priest, a Welshman, a poet, a nationalist—all things we know to be true about R. S. Thomas the man. It is for these reasons that the relationship between idiosyncratic prosody and poetic identity, something present to a degree in all free verse poetry, is particularly strong in the case of R. S. Thomas’s free verse.⁸⁷

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that one must know R. S. Thomas the man—his relationships, his biases, his likes and dislikes, his political views, his reputation,

⁸⁵ See, for example, Barbara Prys-Williams’s “Buried to Be Dug Up”, M. Wynn Thomas’s “‘Time’s Chengeling’: *Autobiography in The Echoes Return Slow*” (*Echoes to the Amen* 183-205), and David Lloyd’s “Through the Looking Glass: R. S. Thomas’s *The Echoes Return Slow* as Poetic Autobiography” (*Twentieth Century Literature* 42.4 [Winter 1996]: 438-52). Clearly there is a prevalent autobiographical element in Thomas’s poetry. Morgan’s assertion—namely that “for Thomas, poetry, by its very definition, *is* autobiography”—is an overstatement, but only just (*R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity* 13).

⁸⁶ In his 1972 review of *H’m*, Jeremy Hooker makes a similar argument, writing that “the I of the poems should discourage us from using them as an excuse for making impertinent observations about the poet’s personality” (*Poetry Wales* 7.4 [1972]: 91).

⁸⁷ It is worth remembering that, as we have discussed in earlier chapters, Thomas’s sense of self was always uncertain. One case in point is his biography, which is written in the third person. Whether one translates its ambiguous title, *Neb*, as “No-One” or “Anyone”, neither pronoun is specific, and there is a curious lack of introspection in the text, as if Thomas were writing about someone he didn’t know very well, which in fact was the case. This elusive, shifting sense of self helps to explain the mutable and fluid poetic forms of the period. Thomas uses these not to define his personality, but to seek it—to “search for the door / To [him]self in dumbness and blindness” (“This to Do” P 10).

in short his *personality*—in order to appreciate his poems. Anne Stevenson has written a moving account of how, as a young mother looking for a book by Dylan Thomas, she mistakenly pulled *Song at the Year's Turning* from a library shelf and, although she knew nothing of the author, felt an instant attraction to the poet's style, to the sense of "unostentatious wholeness" that comes to the reader when "what a poem says is inseparable from what it means".⁸⁸ This affect is achieved by prosody, not personality. Accordingly, the poems themselves deserve critical attention irrespective of what they reveal about their author, but this attention is something they have too rarely been given. This is not to say that one wishes to remove the persona of R. S. Thomas from the poems. The persona is there; it must be reckoned with. Nor can we, or should we, disregard the life of R. S. Thomas the man. Indeed, this thesis clearly takes as its premise that background and biography are important critical tools, integral to our understanding of Thomas's style. This, in fact, *is the very point*. One is not attempting to understand a man by means of his poetry. One is attempting to understand his poetry, specifically his prosody, which was in large measure shaped by his life. Biography is therefore helpful to our undertaking, but only to the degree that it illuminates the poetry.

While Thomas did not immediately abandon rhyme and metre when he arrived at Eglwys-fach, his transition to a largely free-verse poet occurred rather quickly. It did not, however, occur without stylistic models. In "The Making of a Poem" he writes, "A poet has to learn his craft from the study of all other people who have written" (SP 91-2). At Eglwys-fach, Thomas needed a more fluid style, one more capable of "captur[ing] the movements of thoughts, speech, and feeling", and he discovered such a style largely through his reading of American poetry.⁸⁹ But before discussing Thomas's exposure to,

⁸⁸ Anne Stevenson, "The Uses of Prytherch", *The Page's Drift* 37.

⁸⁹ One wishes to be careful about applying a strict, cause-and-effect chronology, or a conscious decision-making, to each stage of Thomas's development, particularly his response to stylistic models. To say that Thomas arrived in Eglwys-fach, realized that he felt out of touch with its inhabitants, and then, as a result, went about finding a style that could express his emotional distress, is clearly too crude. From a critical

and response to, American poetry, we must return to a discussion of Edward Thomas, one of Thomas's first *thematic* models and a poet that seems to have also been a key *stylistic* influence as R. S. Thomas began his transition from syllabic to linear prosody.

Edward Thomas

As we discussed in the first chapter, Edward Thomas was discovered by his namesake while the latter was at Chirk. The young curate was initially drawn to Edward Thomas's imagery because it was grounded in the natural world. At Eglwys-fach, however, R. S. Thomas was emotionally ready to respond to the complexities behind that imagery—to feelings of inauthenticity, to the despair of estrangement, and to a voice that shared a yearning for "home" similar to his own. In short, R. S. Thomas was prepared to respond to the emotional and psychological underpinnings of Edward Thomas's nature poetry, not merely the images themselves. According to Edna Longley,

[Edward] Thomas had deeply absorbed much of Wordsworth and some of Keats. He developed their symbolism of Nature to a point where it could reflect more intimately than ever before the psychology and situation of the individual.[. . .] he explores on a large scale the 'unknown' within us and without us; our alienation from ourselves and the universe.⁹⁰

These three phrases—"the psychology and situation of the individual", "the 'unknown' within us and without us", and "alienation from ourselves and the universe"—work well as thematic descriptions of R. S. Thomas's poetry written at Eglwys-fach. While one hesitates to say that R. S. Thomas "returned to" or "rediscovered" Edward Thomas's work during this time (since he had probably never stopped reading it), it seems likely that he began to read it in a new way. This was presumably a closer, more introspective

standpoint, we can observe patterns of stylistic development and explore possible reasons for those patterns. However, the reasons behind stylistic choices were surely not all calculated, and Thomas was probably not fully aware of the depth of his response to his stylistic models. One wishes to emphasize this, lest Thomas's stylistic journey become an easily-dissectible whole, one with clearly defined signposts and borders. His poetry resists such boundaries.

⁹⁰ *Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems* 11-12.

reading, one that led R. S. Thomas to imbibe some of Edward Thomas's stylistic properties as well. As we have mentioned, in his preface to the selection of Edward Thomas's poems which he published in 1964, while at Eglwys-fach, R. S. Thomas sees many of Edward Thomas's themes as essentially Welsh. Indeed, it would not be a stretch to say that at Eglwys-fach, R. S. Thomas sees Edward Thomas as a parallel, even constructs him as an alter ego:

Edward Thomas wrote in the English language; almost all his poems were about the English countryside. Yet one Welshman, at least, toys with the idea that the melancholy and wry whimsicality, the longing to make the glimpsed good place permanent, which appear in Thomas's verse, may have had a Welsh source.⁹¹

Considering what we know about the background of Eglwys-fach, it is easy to see that it was R. S. Thomas's *own* melancholy, his *own* longing for permanence, that gave him fresh eyes when reading Edward Thomas.

It is perhaps not surprising that feeling a *lack* of permanence at Eglwys-fach—a lack of connection to anything (or anyone) rooted in the Welsh past—R. S. Thomas began to reconsider the Manafon period, even to look back on it with a sense of nostalgia, as one who is displaced looking back on his last “home”, and this despite the fact that he had not felt a sense of “home” in Manafon at the time. Had he been happier in Manafon than he had allowed? Could he perhaps return there, emotionally if not physically? Could he pick up where he left off, or was it time to leave that life behind? The new vicar of Eglwys-fach would have found similar questions in Edward Thomas's work. For example, in a poem entitled “Home” (Edward Thomas has three poems with this title), the speaker longs to “go back again home”, yet questions how such a return, even if it were possible, would happen and whether it would satisfy him:

And could I discover it,
I feel my happiness there,
Or my pain, might be dreams of return

⁹¹ *Selected Poems of Edward Thomas* 11.

Here, to these things that were.

And the speaker finally decides, in the poem's final stanza,

No: I cannot go back,
And would not if I could.
Until blindness come, I must wait
And blink at what is not good.⁹²

R. S. Thomas's poems of the fifties and sixties reveal this same tension—between, on one hand, going back, imaginatively returning to an earlier place and emotional situation and, on the other, waiting, remaining, facing the discomforts of a present environment. And for R. S. Thomas, the pull of the past includes his longing to resume the dialogue with Iago Prytherch. One example of this is "Temptation of a Poet" (PS 14), which begins with the lines,

The temptation is to go back,
To make tryst with the pale ghost
Of an earlier self [. . .]

The speaker then addresses Prytherch, wondering, if the speaker were to return,

could the talk begin
where it left off? Have I not been
Too long away?

The speaker clearly feels "alienated from a previous identity",⁹³ though that identity was always tenuous and even now exists only as a "pale ghost". At the same time, the speaker is also alienated from the present community he is meant to reach out to as a priest, leaving him confused as to how to act, and ultimately frustrated. We see this as the poem ends with an expression of exasperation: "Prytherch, I am undone". With these words, Thomas invokes a passage found in Isaiah 6:5: "Woe *is* me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips". While the speaker of "Temptation of a Poet" is not unambiguously R. S. Thomas, the attitude of the poem, as well as the emotion of the biblical passage, is appropriate to R. S. Thomas

⁹² *Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems* 54.

⁹³ Brown, *R. S. Thomas* 56.

at Eglwys-fach: unable to relate to the people to whom he was meant to minister, people who did not share his values. Unable to accept their values, and unable to minister as he felt he should, he felt himself an “unclean man” amongst an “unclean” people. And yet, despite this sense of despair, there is, in the poem’s conclusion, an enticement to stay, a pull from the present and the future. This pull serves as a resolution to the poem even as the emotions of the speaker remain unresolved:

The past calls with the cool smell
Of autumn leaves, but the mind draws
Me onward blind with the world’s dust,
Seeking a spring that my heart fumbles.

According to Brown, “The mind that draws Thomas on may at one level be his sense of duty to engage the new responsibilities that face him”,⁹⁴ and Thomas surely does feel an obligation to remain in Eglwys-fach, to fulfil his role as priest despite the associated discomforts associated with what he views as an inauthentic existence. This idea is also expressed in the poem “Here” (T 43), where the speaker laments, “I have nowhere to go”, and concludes by saying, “It is too late to start / For destinations not of the heart. / I must stay here with my hurt”.⁹⁵ Again we are reminded of Edward Thomas’s “Home”, where the speaker “must wait / and blink at what is not good”. But significantly, the ending of the R. S. Thomas poem is also a realization that “his *poetry* must move on, should engage his new environment”.⁹⁶ The poem, after all, is entitled “Temptation of a Poet”, not “Temptation of a Man”. In other words, Thomas’s resolve to remain in Eglwys-fach is ultimately a decision to ground his poetry in Eglwys-fach, in the very tension and turmoil he is experiencing. In essence, this becomes a decision to engage

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ The speaker of “Here” is probably Christ, on His cross. His hands will not obey him, and they are “red / With the blood of [. . .] many dead”. If so, the poem certainly suggests something of R. S. Thomas’s state of mind at this point: isolated, in pain, sacrificing something of himself.

⁹⁶ Brown, *R. S. Thomas* 56, italics added.

himself, his environment, and his relationship to his environment *by means of* the poetry.⁹⁷

This decision results in many of the aforementioned political and censorious poems of the period, and also in Thomas's first sustained period of introspection. Indeed, this decision to look into the uncertainty of the interior is very consciously made:

I have this that I must do
One day: overdraw on my balance
Of air, and breaking the surface
Of water go down into the green
Darkness to search for the door
To myself in dumbness and blindness [. . .]
(*"This to Do"* P 12)

And in Thomas's expression of this decision, namely to lose himself in darkness as an attempt to find himself, we again hear the echo of Edward Thomas. The following is from "Lights Out":

There is not any book
Or face of dearest look
That I would not turn from now
To go into the unknown
I must enter, and leave, alone,
I know not how.

The tall forest towers;
Its cloudy foliage lowers
Ahead, shelf above shelf;
Its silence I hear and obey
That I may lose my way
And myself.⁹⁸

There is a distinct difference, of course. R. S. Thomas seeks to lose himself as an attempt to discover who he is, while Edward Thomas, for his part, seeks rather to lose himself, to lapse out of the pain of (self) consciousness. But the echo of Edward Thomas—in diction, register, and theme—is nonetheless striking. One does not wish to suggest a conscious response to Edward Thomas, though such responses *were* present earlier in

⁹⁷ In light of the "claustrophobic vicar syndrome" and the "barrier syndrome", one understands the hurt this decision causes Thomas ("I must stay here with my hurt"). Thomas's personal instinct is to disengage from the Eglwys-fach community. His poetry, however, is the means by which he engages both that community and his role within it.

⁹⁸ *Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems* 132.

Thomas's career, and the process of editing a selection of Edward Thomas's poems while at Eglwys-fach would have strengthened that pre-existing bond between them. But by the time he arrived in Eglwys-fach, R. S. Thomas had internalized Edward Thomas's work, even to the degree that poems which do not at first appear to be responses to Edward Thomas often reveal, upon closer reading, an emotional and imaginative connection. In fact, many of the images, emotions, and words that readers have come to think of as quintessentially R. S. Thomas—an acre of land, a gap in the hedge, a farmer plodding or plowing, birds that are tied to history and the supernatural, even an individual word like “untenanted”—are also present in Edward Thomas's work.⁹⁹

We can say, then, that Edward Thomas showed R. S. Thomas a means of self-exploration in poetry. And examining the poems, we can also see that this emotional response led to a lasting stylistic response as well, one that was very important during a period of stylistic transition. Returning to Edward Thomas's “Lights Out”, we find this opening:

I have come to the borders of sleep,
The unfathomable deep
Forest where all must lose
Their way [. . .].

Readers of R. S. Thomas will immediately recognize the language and register of the opening, echoes of which appear in the opening of R. S. Thomas's later poem, “Gradual”: “I have come to the borders / of the understanding. Instruct / me, God, whether to press / onward or draw back” (LP 178). But it is the lineation of Edward Thomas, even more than his vocabulary and register, that is important here. The interplay, or counterpoint, between lineation and syntax creates in the reader both

⁹⁹ The majority of the Edward Thomas poems that correspond with these images are quoted or mentioned in Chapter 1. Thomas's poem “The Gap in the Hedge” appears in *An Acre of Land*, and the Edward Thomas image appears in “Over the Hills”: “Often and often it came back again / To mind, the day I passed the horizon ridge / To a new country, the path I had to find / By half-gaps that were stiles once in the hedge”. The adjective “untenanted” is used by R. S. Thomas to describe the cross of the crucifixion, which becomes a symbol of the absent God. Edward Thomas uses the word in “Gone, Gone Again”: “Look at the old house, / Outmoded, dignified, / *Dark and untenanted*”, italics added.

surprise and suspense. The first instance of enjambment, for example, both surprises the reader and leads him or her to multiple interpretations. The terminal word of line two, “deep”, is initially read as a noun, specifically as a sea metaphor because of the dual meaning of “unfathomable”; also, because “unfathomable deep” simulates an adjective/noun combination, it first appears to be a modifier for sleep. But after engaging with the third line, the reader must re-evaluate, realizing that “deep” is in fact an adjective and a modifier for “forest”. In other words, rather than the deep sea being a metaphor for sleep, the *forest* is actually the metaphor for sleep. The effect on the reader is remarkable: “deep” is, in effect, both an adjective *and* a noun since it functions as both during the reading experience. This surprising technique—which Helen Vendler, in her analysis of R. S. Thomas’s painting poems, refers to as forcing the reader to “replicate the process of interpretation”—is not created by rhyme or meter.¹⁰⁰ The prosody is linear.

As Alan Holder points out,

Line-breaks [. . .] can create the impression of semantic *completion*, which in fact turns out to be not the case. The line may *appear* not to be enjambed, but as we proceed we find out that it is.¹⁰¹

We encounter further examples of counterpointing as we continue with the line, coming to another modifier, this time of the forest. It is a place “Where all must lose / Their way”. For the briefest of moments, because of the line break separating transitive verb and direct object, exactly *what* must be lost in this forest is unclear. Indeed, in “all must lose”, “lose” is first read as an intransitive verb, as in “all must be defeated”. The reader must continue to the subsequent line in order to find out that “lose” is a transitive verb and that “all”—including the reader—must become lost. This pause creates a momentary sense of disorientation, so that the act of reading the poem becomes a demonstration of its theme; that is, by the time the reader discovers that “their way” must be lost along with the speaker’s, the reader has already become lost. The counterpointing of lineation

¹⁰⁰ “R. S. Thomas and Painting” *The Page’s Drift* 65.

¹⁰¹ *Rethinking Meter* 142.

and syntax was not at all commonplace in Edward Thomas's day (or, for that matter, among R. S. Thomas's British contemporaries in the 1950s). He is working in rhyme, but his use of counterpoint is independent of those elements, and it would be inaccurate to suggest that the above line break exists merely to pair the rhyming words *sleep/deep*. It is likely that Edward Thomas's rhymes *did* lead him to significant formal discoveries, but the point is that he did discover them; the lineation is clearly not arbitrary. Repeatedly breaking a line across syntax is something his Georgian contemporaries would never have approved of, let alone attempted. Presumably, this is one reason R. S. Thomas continued to read him even after he had let go of his early Georgian models: Edward Thomas had both a subject matter *and* a style that was helpful to him as he made the transition to free verse.

And what we indeed discover is that counterpoint, particularly as it is used to create suspense and surprise, is a central characteristic of Thomas's post-Manafon poetry, and it is at Eglwys-fach that it begins to appear in the poems with regularity:

At fifty he was still trying to deceive
Himself.

("A Country" BT 30)

I take their hands,
Hard hands. There is no love
For such, only a willed
Gentleness.

("They" NBF 39)

On the smudged empires the dust
Lies and in the libraries
Of the poets. The flowers wither
On love's grave.

("Because" P 8)

Was he a survival
Of a lost past, wearing the times'
Shabbier cast-offs, refusing to change
His lean horse for the quick tractor?

("Which" T 42)

In the first example, from “A Country”, the effect of the line break is similar to Edward Thomas’s line “Where all must lose / Their way” in that the action of the verb suddenly turns back on the speaker following the break. What appears to be a transitive verb, “deceive”, is actually a reflexive verb, so that the reader momentarily wonders whom the speaker is trying to deceive, only to realize that this is in fact an attempt at self-deception. In “They”, the act of reading the poem mirrors the poem’s theme, similar to what we observed in Edward Thomas’s “Lights Out”. The line break, “willed / Gentleness”, forces the reader to pause, the phrase left incomplete, until the speaker’s voice wills, even forces out the word “gentleness”. Or perhaps the line break is a moment of indecision, where the lineation mimics the speaker’s uncertainty as to what exactly it is he feels. The reader interprets this “gentleness” as a compulsory kindness, a gentility that is very hard even to say, let alone live out. The poem “Which” provides a further example of Thomas using lineation to create multiple interpretations. We first read “refusing to change” as a description of Prytherch’s stubborn character as he clings to “a lost past”. But the line break causes us to reinterpret the meaning as we realize that “change” is a transitive verb, and that it actually refers to an exchange that Prytherch refuses to make: horse for tractor (unlike others of Thomas’s farmers, who roar by on their “hot tractors”).¹⁰²

Thomas’s use of counterpoint does several things: it subverts expectation, it inspires multiple interpretations (and thus multiple meanings), and it creates, by means of a shifting prosody, a sense of insecurity and instability within the reader. All of these are fundamental aspects of Thomas’s linear prosody. Their importance to the poetry’s emotional effect(s) on the reader cannot be overstated. Few critics, however, have discussed them. Rowan Williams is an exception. He refers to the technique as “a practice sometimes thought to be careless or arbitrary, unexpected line breaks and a

¹⁰² “A Welsh Testament” (T 39).

consequent rather jarring enjambement". But, as Williams goes on to observe, this "practice" is not arbitrary at all:

These [line breaks] have the effect of redistributing the sense of statement, destabilising surface meanings, and so relativising the claim of any particular sentence (and it is interesting to note that they work *visually* more than aurally: Thomas's rhetoric is generally one of the written even more than the spoken word, and it is not in fact easy to read him aloud adequately).¹⁰³

When each sentence, each line, even each word can be "relativised" in this way, both the poem and the reader's experience of it become "destabilised", variable, never on solid ground. And, recalling our earlier discussion about the idiosyncratic nature of prosody and the poetic persona, one realizes that the experience of reading an R. S. Thomas poem often returns us to the persona of an insecure, "home"-less R. S. Thomas. This is perhaps the chief success of the Eglwys-fach poetry: the unstable, shifting experience of the poem itself is shared between the poetic persona and the reader, so that the poem is "held out to you in / silent communion, where graspingly / you partake of a shifting / identity never your own"—or at least never your own for very long.¹⁰⁴

One further result of such a technique, one that Williams also mentions, is that linear prosody is of necessity also visual prosody. Line breaks, stanza breaks, indentations and other spatial arrangements cannot be heard; they must be seen in order to be effective. In fact, for Thomas, the visual element of prosody is an important part of a poem's composition:

Yeats used to compose aloud, whereas I compose on the page. [. . .] I believe that the inner ear which goes into operation as the eye runs along a line of poetry is more delicate and subtle than the outer ear.
(*"The Making of a Poem"* SP 86.)

While R. S. Thomas remains an aural poet to the end (he is speaking of the eye *in relation* to the ear, not as a replacement for it), the visual element of the poems increases in importance as his style evolves. Thomas is particularly good at taking advantage of the

¹⁰³ "Adult Geometry": Dangerous Thoughts in R. S. Thomas", *The Page's Drift* 91.

¹⁰⁴ From "Reflections" (NIF 31).

visual line as the most established convention of poetry. While the line in English-language poetry is no longer a closed unit with end-stopped lines, words and phrases that appear on the same line are still considered together “as the eye runs along a line of poetry”. As he does by breaking a line across syntax, Thomas destabilizes the reading experience by creating, then subverting, linear associations (just as Edward Thomas does in “Lights Out”). We see an example of this as we return to “They”, where the phrase “There is no love” shares a line with “Hard hands”, so we are led to believe that it is Thomas’s Eglwys-fach parishioners—those whom he visits, preaches to, and is meant to shepherd—that are without love, but after the line break we are surprised to learn that it is in fact the speaker, the very one who takes those hands in a seeming “act” of love, who is bereft of love. A more intricate example of this technique is found in the next of the above examples, “Because”. Initially, the poem appears to have two parallel sentences: “On the smudged empires the dust / Lies” and “in the libraries / Of the poets the flowers wither”. In other words, a prepositional phrase about place leads on to the action that happens within that place. However, “The flowers wither” actually corresponds to a prepositional phrase on the *next* line, “On love’s grave”, *not* the preceding phrase as the poem’s lineation has led us to believe. Lineation, as well as the expectation created by the poem’s previous phrase, encourages the reader to place those withering flowers in the poets’ libraries, but when confronted with the full stop after “poets”, the reader must readjust, rethink, and reassess. Once again, we find Thomas leading us toward complexities in meaning, and multiple meanings, by shifting our angle of vision. As Rowan Williams suggests:

What each sentence ‘actually’ (grammatically) says is shadowed by the way the lines are divided, so that the collocation of words in one line, or the apparent sense of a line standing alone, somehow nags at the reader’s awareness, setting up a counterpoint of meaning.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ “Adult Geometry”, *The Page’s Drift* 91.

This “counterpoint of meaning” is also enhanced through words with multiple meanings. For example, the word “lies” is a pun (as it often is in Thomas’s work). On one hand, the dust physically rests upon those “smudged empires”, and on the other, it tells a falsehood, an inaccurate story of the past. Thus, the momentary grammatical and linear deception, also a kind of “lie”, is once again a formal illustration of the poem’s theme. Thomas typically places these punning words at the beginnings or ends of lines, which are points of heightened attention in any poem, but particularly in his brand of free verse, where the line ending is the point of counterpoint. With puns, Damian Walford-Davies observes, Thomas “sets up subversive cross currents of meaning”, even “illusions”.¹⁰⁶ Thomas, in fact, does this with all aspects of his linear prosody, creating fluid meaning. He can adjust our initial interpretations or replace them; he can either create confusion or lead us to moments of surprising, instant clarity (or both). In every case, he keeps the reader at a heightened state of attention, even anticipation. In fact, much of the pleasure of the reading experience comes from the hesitation created by careful line breaks, as the reader is suspended between meanings, anticipating gradation and refocusing at every turn. The more one reads R. S. Thomas, the more one gives in to that *ethos*, trusting that the constantly shifting ground will be rewarding in the end, or rather at the end (of the poem), even if the experienced tension will only be dispelled until the next poem begins.

While R. S. Thomas’s stylistic response to Edward Thomas was clearly important to his development in its own right, it was also of great consequence because it prepared him for further experiments with linear prosody. At Eglwys-fach, Thomas was also exposed to the work of poets from across the Atlantic, and in their work he encountered a more flexible, more fluid style than he had been using at Manafon. It was a style R. S. Thomas would not have found among his British contemporaries, but it was well-suited to the personal, introspective poetry he was beginning to write.

¹⁰⁶ “R. S. Thomas – Punster”, *Echoes to the Amen* 155.

American Poetry

R. S. Thomas's reading of American poetry seems to have begun around the same time he arrived at Eglwys-fach. In a 1957 BBC broadcast, he mentions Whitman, Frost, Marianne Moore, Archibald MacLeish, Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom,¹⁰⁷ and his *Penguin Book of Religious Verse* (1963) contains work by several American poets, including Frost, Jeffers, Ransom, Whitman, and Wallace Stevens. But Thomas's exposure to contemporary American poetry, and in particular to those American poets who made regular use of linear prosodies, came chiefly through his association with *Critical Quarterly*, a journal started in 1959 by C. B. Cox and A.E. Dyson. Thomas mentions that relationship, and his interaction with *Critical Quarterly*, in an interview with Molly Price-Owen, where he is discussing his influences:

I think one of the influences was: I gave a reading at University in Bangor. [. . .] and Tony Dyson, A. Dyson, a lecturer in Bangor at the time and I seemed to make a bit of an impression on him and we gradually developed a kind of liaison because he, along with Brian Cox, C.B. Cox, were editing *Critical Quarterly*. The early sixties was a time when the so-called leading poets were Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Philip Larkin and myself. So again I read at one or two of their conferences [. . .] and I kept up an occasional conversation with Tony Dyson. So that I was really then beginning to see what contemporary English poetry was about. And that put me on to people like Eliot and Pound and Larkin of course, Plath—all those people. [. . .] So I was considering myself a contemporary poet in English at that time.¹⁰⁸

Thomas's work first appeared in *Critical Quarterly* in 1960, and he was a regular contributor thereafter, both in the journal itself and in the poetry supplements which the journal published annually. In *Critical Quarterly*, Thomas's work appeared alongside that

¹⁰⁷ "A Time for Carving", BBC Welsh Home Service, 21 April 1957. As Brown observes, Thomas "discusses American writers' firm sense of national identity" in the broadcast, and he "compares it to the Welsh writer in English" (R. S. Thomas 73).

¹⁰⁸ "R. S. Thomas in Conversation with Molly Price-Owen" 94.

of British poets such as Thom Gunn, Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Jennings, and Ted Hughes, but also alongside American poets such as Anne Sexton, James Wright, Sylvia Plath, Louis Simpson, and Adrienne Rich. These poets should be included in our understanding of “all those people” Thomas was reading as he was consciously trying to develop as a “contemporary poet”. Two of the journal’s poetry supplements featured American poets exclusively. The first American-only edition, *American Poetry Now* (1961), was edited by Sylvia Plath, who, like Thomas, attended the *Critical Quarterly* summer schools in Bangor and in London. In her introduction to the selection, Plath writes that “*American Poetry Now* is a selection of poems by new and/or youngish American poets *for the most part unknown in Britain*” (italics added). Likewise, in their introduction to the second American-only poetry supplement, *American Poetry 1965*, Cox and Dyson write that “[in 1963] Philip Larkin, Ted, Hughes, Thom Gunn and R. S. Thomas were achieving considerable popularity in England, and the general reader *knew comparatively little of recent American writing*” (italics added). In other words, Plath, Cox, and Dyson all recognized that many, if not most, British readers and poets had not been exposed to recent American poetry during the 1950s and 60s. This demonstrates a lack of discourse at that time between American and British poetry, one that *Critical Quarterly* sought to overcome. It also explains why open forms, liberal enjambment, and the breaking of syntax across the movement between lines would have been new discoveries for R. S. Thomas. Already well-established in American poetry, these characteristics were not yet common in Britain. “The Movement” that took place in Britain in the 1950s, and which continued to shape the mainstream of British poetry into the 1960s, favoured a very different style. According to Peter Finch,

[Movement poetry] nurtured rationality, was inhospitable to myth, was conversationally pitched (although lacking the speech rhythms of American counterparts like William Carlos Williams) and was deliberately formal and clear. Movement poets opposed modernism and had little involvement with international influences. They regarded themselves as a

direct continuation of mainstream English tradition. [. . .] While other literatures accommodated mercurial change, mainstream English poetry stuck with decorative, rational discourse.¹⁰⁹

This description obviously cannot be applied to all British poetry written during the 1950s and 60s. Finch subsequently notes that “on the fringes things were different”; certainly there were British poets who came on the scene in the 50s and carved out new stylistic paths, notably Ted Hughes, who also attended the *Critical Quarterly* summer schools, and Geoffrey Hill, whose *For the Unfallen* was published in 1959. But these were exceptions. American free verse poets, particularly the so-called Confessionals, “had no counterparts” in the British Movement.¹¹⁰ More importantly, R. S. Thomas, unlike the Movement poets, *did* have “involvement with international influences”.¹¹¹ He *was* willing, even eager, to “accommodate mercurial change”, and even before arriving at Eglwysfach, he had essentially abandoned “decorative, rational discourse”; moreover, unlike Movement poetry (but similar to the work of Hughes and Hill), his work *is* “hospitable to myth”.

It is also notable that Finch mentions William Carlos Williams, a poet whose influence, as we have mentioned, casts a shadow over all American free verse, especially the free verse lyric. David Lloyd has written persuasively about Thomas’s debt to Williams, arguing that Thomas possessed “an Americanized and Modernized sense of form”.¹¹² And so he did, though one notes that many of the stylistic attributes which Lloyd mentions, in particular “sentences that force a reader to track and anticipate—and

¹⁰⁹ “Poetry Since 1945”, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of British Literature* (New York: Continuum, 2003) 768.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 769.

¹¹¹ In *The Concise Encyclopedia of English and American Poets and Poetry* (London: Hutchinson, 1963), Stephen Spender and Donald Hall assert that “the best [British poetry] that is being written at the present time is almost completely English in ancestry. Phillip LARKIN, Thom GUNN, Ted HUGHES, and R. S. THOMAS show no evidence of foreign reading” (139). The same year Spender and Hall published their *Concise Encyclopedia*, Thomas published *The Bread of Truth*, which contains the poem “Wallace Stevens” (25), of which an earlier version appeared in *The Listener* in 1962. While Spender and Hall may not have seen that poem prior to going to press, the linear techniques Thomas uses in *Tares* (1961) clearly reveal “evidence of foreign reading”. An even more glaring contradiction to Spender and Hall’s assertion is Thom Gunn’s *My Sad Captains* (1961). By the time that volume was published, Gunn had been living in America for some time, and approximately half of the volume is written in a free verse that unmistakably reflects his extensive “foreign reading”.

¹¹² “Making it New: R. S. Thomas and William Carlos Williams” 123.

re-evaluate—grammatical elements, and that distribute meaning incrementally among successive clauses”,¹¹³ were also present in the work of those free verse poets Thomas would have read in *Critical Quarterly*. Of course this does not preclude Williams as an influence; indeed, many of the American poets featured in *Critical Quarterly* were themselves influenced by Williams, and the parallels between Thomas’s pointed cuts against syntax and Williams’s use of enjambment are many, as Lloyd illustrates. However, without wanting to discount the importance of Lloyd’s work, one does wish to briefly point out some important differences between the two poets. Lloyd is correct, for example, in his assertion that both poets “exploit the formal possibilities of syntax and grammar”,¹¹⁴ but they often do so in very different ways. Williams regularly inverts, or disarranges, syntax, and he frequently extends a single sentence—or rather, a collage of fragments and images—over several short stanzas or an entire poem, shaping the lines with spatial arrangement rather than sentence logic; as a result, his lines would often not read well (or at all) as prose. Conversely, R. S. Thomas’s sentences would, in general, be quite readable (if much less interesting) as prose, and although spatiality is important in his later work, it is primarily his use of counterpoint, his breaking of the line across syntax at carefully selected moments, that allows him to “exploit [. . .] syntax and grammar”. And, unlike Williams, who believed that “time, not the syllables, *must* be counted” in a line of poetry,¹¹⁵ R. S. Thomas does not “count” anything in his free verse, as most of the free verse poets featured in *Critical Quarterly* do not. Nor were these poets attempting to write “measured” poetry, which Williams (confusingly) describes as a hybrid of sorts between metre and free verse.¹¹⁶ Finally, and perhaps most importantly,

¹¹³ Ibid. 127.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 126.

¹¹⁵ “Speech Rhythm” (1913), quoted in Stephen Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meaning of Measure* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale UP, 1985) 1. Prosody that asks the reader to count time within a line is now commonly referred to as *isochrony*.

¹¹⁶ Williams is the author of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry’s* entry on “Free Verse”, which he uses as an opportunity to broadcast his mystifying theory of the “variable foot”, often referred to as “the rubber inch”: “The new unit thus created may be called the ‘variable foot,’ a term and a concept already accepted

Williams is not nearly as introspective as R. S. Thomas; indeed, his poetry is, on the whole, intentionally *external*—"No ideas but in things", he famously wrote as a refrain line in the first draft of "Paterson"¹¹⁷—and his use of enjambment, while it certainly can, like Thomas's lines, force the reader to make continual adjustments, is rarely used as an extension of his own emotional processes in the way that R. S. Thomas's flexible line so commonly is. In this way, Thomas's linear prosody is much closer to that of a poet like Adrienne Rich, or even the Confessionals, in that it is primarily a *seeking* prosody, an extension of emotional content.¹¹⁸

Much like Thomas's earlier response to the Georgians, which was a general assimilation of stylistic elements, Thomas's response to the American poets in *Critical Quarterly* does not betray the influence of any one poet. Rather, his response is principally an embracing of new stylistic possibilities, particularly the potential for what we might call flexible demonstration. On the whole, American free verse in the 1950s and 60s viewed prosody as an expression, or *extension*, of emotional content. For these poets, prosody was not a toolbox of historically-determined devices that could shape a separable content. R. S. Thomas would have been particularly drawn to the work of those American writers who broke new ground by tying prosody to an exploration of individual emotion and psychology.

Some theoretical commentary will be helpful here. In the late 50s and throughout the 60s, American poets were writing in the wake of the "Black Mountain" school

widely as a means of bringing the warring elements of freedom and discipline together. [. . .] The verse of genuine poetry can never be 'free,' but f[ree] v[er]se, interpreted in terms of the variable foot, removes many artificial obstacles between the poet and the fulfillment of the laws of his design" (quoted in Cushman, 11).

¹¹⁷ *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams Vol. 1, 1909-1939*. Eds. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986) 263-64: "—Say it, no ideas but in things—nothing but the blank faces of the houses / and cylindrical trees [. . .]. Say it! No ideas but in things. Mr. / Paterson has gone away / to rest and write".

¹¹⁸ This does not invalidate the comparisons Lloyd makes, which are insightful, particularly his section on both poets' responses to visual art; indeed, his study can be called ground-breaking since Thomas's response to American poetry had previously been ignored. However, R. S. Thomas's most significant *direct* response to Williams, one that Lloyd does not discuss, is not his lineation, but rather his late use of visual line groupings, or "sight-stanzas". These visual elements of Thomas's prosody are discussed in Chapter 5.

(named after Black Mountain College in North Carolina), the principles of which created a foundation for much subsequent free verse theory. In fact, the Black Mountain manifesto, Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" (1950), is one of the defining poetics of the twentieth century. In "Projective Verse", Olson famously argued that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT".¹¹⁹ Rather than an agreed-upon pattern or metre, or a predetermined number of syllables or lines, the form of any given poem rises in the act of writing because the poet "can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares for itself". Because of this, the form of every poem is unique and essentially inimitable. Olson also believed in what he called "composition by field", considering that the entire page—spaces, margins, and especially lines—could be shaped in such a way that they mirrored the poet's "breath"; as a result, the "energy" of inspiration and impetus could be transferred from the poet to the reader. He called this *kinetics*: "energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader".¹²⁰ "Projective verse" is ideally a communicative prosody, one that creates a shared experience. But in order for this "energy transfer" to take place, the poem must maintain the reader's attention. It does so by continually moving forward: "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION [. . .] Any slackening takes off attention, that crucial thing, from the job in hand, from the *push* of the line under the hand at the movement, under the reader's eye, in his moment".¹²¹

Many of the poems R. S. Thomas would have read in *Critical Quarterly* offer practical examples of the ideas expressed by Olson. The following lines are from

¹¹⁹ From "Projective Verse" (1950), *Strong Words* 92-99. Olson capitalized entire words and sentences to stress their importance.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

Adrienne Rich's poem "Like This Together", which appeared in the 1965 *Critical*

Quarterly supplement:¹²²

Sometimes at night
you are my mother:
old detailed griefs
twitch at my dreams, and I
crawl against you, fighting
for shelter, making you
my cave. Sometimes
you're the wave of birth
that drowns me in my first
nightmare. I suck the air.
Miscarried knowledge twists us
Like hot sheets thrown askew.¹²³

The first thing one notices is that despite Rich's tendency to break lines across syntax, the grammar is relatively straight-forward, and her sentences would be quite readable as prose (though much less effective). As we have already suggested, counterpoint depends on the conventions of grammar; if the poet is to craft an interplay between syntax and lineation, the syntax must first create expectations. Those expectations can then be rewarded or frustrated (or both) depending on where the lines are broken, what occurs at the point of enjambment, and what word(s) the reader encounters after descending to the next line. Rich's prosody, indeed all linear prosody, relies on tension, which is often created by an anticipation of the *contre-rejet*, or continuation of the enjambed line (literally "throw-back").

One way to appreciate the effectiveness of Rich's linear prosody is by appreciating what she is *not* doing, namely writing in prose or syntax verse (by "syntax verse", one has in mind a free verse where line breaks merely correspond to natural breaks in syntax; such a prosody, favoured by Whitman and early Ezra Pound, cannot

¹²² Rich, whose stylistic evolution parallels R. S. Thomas's in that she wrote accentual-syllabic poetry, then accentual poetry, before making the transition to free verse in the late 1950s, was not directly affiliated with the Black Mountain school, nor is she an "open-field" poet (as indeed R. S. Thomas is not) in the manner of Charles Olson, who at times travels the "field" of the page with lines, stanzas, and individual words. However, the ideas in *Projective Verse* offer the nearest thing to a comprehensive theory of American free verse prosody during the 1950s and 60s.

¹²³ *Poems, Selected and New* (New York: Norton, 1975) 75.

make use of linear counterpoint). A prose rendering of one sentence reads this way: “old detailed griefs twitch at my dreams, and I crawl against you, fighting for shelter, making you my cave”. Here, the absence of lineation makes for a much smoother reading, but that “smoothness” also decreases demand on the reader’s attention. And where there is less attention, there is less awareness, and where there is less awareness, subtleties—multiple meanings, puns, rewarded or frustrated expectations—can be missed. This prose rendering is an extreme example of what Olson calls “slackening”, something that often occurs in syntax verse. For example, a version of the poem where lineation is dictated by syntax might read this way:

old detailed griefs twitch at my dreams,
and I crawl against you,
fighting for shelter,
making you my cave.

In this version, the poem obviously loses tension. One gets the sense that nothing must breach the boundary of the line, and the closed line endings sap momentum, the “*push* of the line”. Each line, and its meaning, becomes more predictable. Consecutive lines that begin with imperfect verbs (“fighting”, “making”) contribute to this predictability. Predictable, reliable lineation does not encourage attention. While one might equate metered verse or syntax verse with a higher degree of order than in counterpoint verse, this order does not necessarily translate to prosodic control. If, as we discussed earlier, “the prosody of a poem is the poet’s method of controlling the reader’s temporal experience of the poem, especially his attention to that experience”, then any slackening in attention and momentum is also a potential loss of control. Or, to use Olson’s terminology, the “energy transfer” between the poet and reader risks failure when the poem’s *kinetics* are slowed or loosened.

In the poem’s true version, however, Rich’s linear prosody actually *creates* momentum and *promotes* reader attention. For example, her sentences and phrases, when

they do end, end *mid*-line, creating pauses, caesurae. A mid-line pause does not stop momentum like end-line punctuation because the conventions of the poetic line encourage a continual left to right progression. When the poem finds, at the end of each line, not a stop or natural grammatical pause, but a *suspension*, both the line break and the conventions of sentence grammar propel the reader into the next line to finish the syntactical phrase and relieve suspense. The reader's brain inserts a question into the white space. "Old detailed griefs / twitch at my dreams, and I / [*what does the speaker do?*] crawl against you, fighting / [*what does the speaker fight?*] for shelter [*aha, fight for something, for shelter*] making you / [*making you what? Making you do something, as in forcing?*] my cave [*aha, making you into something, a cave*]"'. Of course one does not wish to suggest that the reader literally pauses to ask these things. Such considerations must happen in real-time as the reader constantly adjusts. Because of momentum, or *kinetics*, the reader is pushed forward, processing these questions as he or she is simultaneously interpreting the imagery and language, deciding, for example, what it means to "crawl against" someone or "make [someone] a cave".¹²⁴ But what we can say for certain is that the prosody encourages, even demands, attention. Line breaks create an almost physical gravity, where the reader falls from each line ending into white space, syntactically suspended, until he or she makes the linear turn; then the reader adjusts, and readjusts, as he or she confronts whatever is waiting in each subsequent line. That gravity and suspension, because it is consistently reintroduced, is only fully dispelled at the end of the stanza, where the reader lands on stable ground. Lineation briefly aligns with syntax, and the poem settles on the visceral image of twisted sheets. Indeed, one could argue that the poem's theme is summarized by the last lines: "Miscarried knowledge twists us / like hot sheets thrown askew".

¹²⁴ One natural result of this fast-paced, suspense-driven prosody is that due to its many nuances and intricacies, it rewards multiple readings.

Rich also requires reader adjustments by using the conventions of the line to create multiple readings. The colon after “mother”, for example, encourages us to look forward, to expect a modifier for “mother”. Accordingly, the line “old detailed griefs”, which gets its own line, is first read as a modifier; in other words, the narratee is not just associated with “old detailed griefs”, but for an instant *is* those “old griefs”, leading the reader to infer some past sadness between speaker and narratee. It is only when we read the verb “twitch” at the head of the next line that we realize these “griefs” are a grammatical subject rather than a modifier (but in fact they function as both). This is an example of using the conventions of grammar (and punctuation) to create multiple readings. Additionally, when Rich writes, “griefs / twitch at my dreams, and I / crawl against you”, the reader expects a verb after “and I” for two reasons. First, the previous sentence is also broken between subject and verb, creating the expectation, and second, the clause begins with a subject personal pronoun, which requires a subsequent verb. Rich could defy this expectation, as she does elsewhere, but in this case she chooses to confirm it. By modulating in this way—now thwarting expectation, now validating it—Rich maintains reader attention.

Finally, Rich is able, by heightening reader attention, to make the reader aware of individual words with multiple meanings. The poem’s central metaphor is the act of giving birth (one may insert another reader question here [*giving birth to what?*]), and her diction plays off that metaphor. For example, “miscarried knowledge” can be read as “mishandled knowledge”, where the two parties in this relationship carry and use the knowledge they have in an ill fashion. But because of the central metaphor, the word is read in light of a birth that does not come to term, a miscarriage, which suggests that the two parties in this relationship are “twisted” because things happen to them, or perhaps they act, before their thoughts are fully formed. The narratee, who is described as “mother”, may be spouse or lover or friend, but the speaker, as child of that “mother”, is

somehow, “sometimes” stillborn. Prosody also calls our attention to the only sentence that is not enjambed: “I suck the air”. Because it sits on one line, the sentence calls a tremendous amount of attention to itself. The word “suck” has multiple meanings in the context of the poem. Of course a newborn infant takes in air for the first time, struggling to fill its lungs, and the speaker is likewise struggling, exasperated by this relationship. But “suck” is the word usually used for feeding, as in giving suck, and the implication is that in this relationship, the speaker is at times fed only air, nothing nourishing.

There is much more we could observe about this poem, but it is a good example of how linear prosody can function and, more importantly, it is a good representation of the kind of American poetry Thomas was reading in *Critical Quarterly*. Not only does “Like This Together” use lineation in interesting ways, but it also uses linear prosody to *explore emotional content*, and this is fundamental in the work of Rich, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, Gary Snyder, William Stafford, Denise Levertov, and several other American poets who appeared in *Critical Quarterly*. Linear prosody is particularly good at exploring emotional content because there is remarkable opportunity for nuanced meaning in the breaking of a line. Levertov, for example, argues that linear prosody is “exploratory” and that it “can record the slight (but meaningful) hesitations between word and word that are characteristic of the mind’s dance among perceptions”.¹²⁵ Fundamental to this “dance” is flexibility; in linear prosody, there is extraordinary leeway in the breaking of the line. According to Olson, “it is right here, in the line, that the shaping takes place, *each moment of the going*”.¹²⁶ Because of this, the poet may create the impression of a line that mirrors not just the speaking voice, but also the *thinking* voice and the *feeling* voice.

¹²⁵ “On the Function of the Line” (1979), *Claims for Poetry*, ed. Donald Hall (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1982) 266.

¹²⁶ “Projective Verse” 95, italics added.

The poems written at Eglwys-fach, like the poems of those American writers Thomas was reading, rely on a flexible, linear prosody. In a similar manner to that which we observed in Rich's "Like This Together", Thomas's lineation begins, at Eglwys-fach, to be shaped "each moment of the going" as it explores emotional content, and the poems maintain both tension and attention through a forward momentum. Also like Rich, Thomas uses few fragments and rarely inverts or disturbs syntax (except when he disturbs it by interrupting it with line breaks). As the following examples demonstrate, the speaker is typically exploring, or following, an emotion or idea, and the variable line adjusts as it tracks this process, surprising the reader, subverting expectations, and creating multiple versions of the poem that must be processed in real-time:

There are still those other
 Castaways on a sea
 Of grass, who call to me [. . .]
 ("Those Others" T 31)

I have this that I must do
 One day: overdraw on my balance
 Of air, and breaking the surface
 Of water go down into the green
 Darkness to search for the door
 To myself in dumbness and blindness
 And uproar of scared blood
 At the eardrums.
 ("This to Do" P 12)

There is a house with
 a face mooning at the glass
 of windows. Those eyes—I look
 at not with them, but something of
 their melancholy I
 begin to lay claim to as my own.
 [.]
 Son, from the mirror
 you hold to me I turn
 to recriminate. That likeness
 you are at work upon—it hurts.
 (Careers, NBF 7)

In the first example, from "Those Others", the word "other" is separated from "Castaways" so that "those other" briefly stands alone, reinforcing the title and

emphasizing apartness. Those others are both thematically and *structurally* “other”, as in “removed” and “separate”, detached from the speaker (who is also “other”) by the poem’s lineation. “Castaways on a sea” is an example of a line that gives the appearance of completion. The reader pictures castaways on a raft or boat, floating on the sea, only to discover that this is actually (or additionally) a “sea / Of grass” and that the sea metaphor applies to hill farmers “Clinging” not to life rafts but “to their doomed farms”. They have been “cast away” by the modern Welsh who, we learn elsewhere in the poem, “brood with dark face / Over their thin navel / To lean what to sell”. There is possibly a pun on navel/naval here as well, preparing us for the sea metaphor.¹²⁷

In the second example, from “This to Do”, the first line gives the appearance of completion and determination, but the enjambment forces the reader to readjust. It “creates a doubling back effect, a recoil from the bold approach of the opening line”.¹²⁸ The line “overdraw on my balance” is a banking term, presenting the reader with a financial connotation before immediately adjusting it, rendering the connotation a metaphor for air. The reader then follows the poem through diving imagery, tracking a speaker who is “breaking the surface / Of water” to “go down into the green / Darkness to search for the door”. The reader is submerged with the speaker, apparently diving to a shipwreck, where there might indeed be a door. (Adrienne Rich comes to mind again; perhaps her best-known poem, “Diving into the Wreck”, uses similar imagery as a metaphor for self-exploration.) After the line break, however, we learn that this is a door “To myself”, a door that will be searched for “in dumbness and blindness”. The poem then continues with the diving metaphor. Just as a diver feels increased pressure on the ears, the speaker senses an “uproar of scared blood / At the eardrums”. A poem, of course, cannot be “dumb”, at least in the sense of being silent, but Thomas, via words, is

¹²⁷ As we will see in Chapter 5, Thomas makes this same pun in “Sonata in X” (MHT 81), an important late poem.

¹²⁸ Christopher Morgan, *R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity* 14.

drawing the reader's attention *away* from the idea of words and towards the interior, the "blood". It is, in fact, the *interior* that can frighten the poet. In order to examine the self, the poet must abnegate sight and language, the sensual means by which poets usually interact with the world. Barriers, the kind that can preserve an ideal vision, are of no use here. The speaker must be *immersed* in what he most fears: the self. And while the act of self-exploration is frightening, the poem itself is an act of exploration, or rather a tracking of the fear and hesitancy surrounding self-examination. Lineation effectively illustrates this, transferring the energy and emotion of the speaker to the reader.

The final example, taken from "Careers", highlights the act of self-reflection. The line "a face mooning at the glass" brings to the reader's mind an image of a mirror, a face glowing therein. But after the line break, "the glass / of windows", the reader discovers that this is in fact a window acting as a mirror, and that the window belongs to the previously mentioned home. In other words, the face is reflected in a domestic setting. The subsequent linear pairing of "Those eyes—I look" generates questions in the reader's mind about that reflection. Is the speaker seeing his own eyes or another's. Is the speaker looking *at* "those eyes" or looking *through* them? This question is resolved to a degree after the line break. The speaker looks *at* the eyes not *with* them (the reflection, we now realize, is not the speaker's own face), but he does recognize himself in them: "but something of / their melancholy I / begin to lay claim to as my own". By placing the words "melancholy" and "I" together, the speaker associates himself with that mood, and by ending the line with "I", the speaker directs attention to the self; the "I", suspended at the end of the line, reminds us of the "eye/I" pairing two lines earlier. The poem, in fact, is ultimately about looking at the self, the "I". The speaker's son reminds him of his own childhood, causing him to reflect on a painful past (at the beginning of the poem the speaker mentions "The broken elbow? / the lost toy?"). The speaker also uses words like "pain" and "suffered", but we don't know initially that these memories

are triggered by the son. Small revelations occur as the reader descends, feeling his or her way through the poem, and the poem culminates as the speaker addresses the son: “Son, from the mirror / you hold to me I turn / to recriminate”. Thomas’s lineation is extremely effective here.¹²⁹ “Son, from the mirror” acts as almost a label, as if the son actually emerges from the mirror, stepping out of the speaker’s reflection (in both senses of that word). The line “you hold to me I turn” emphasizes two acts, the act of holding, by the son, and the act of turning, by the speaker—turning *away*, turning *from*. There is discomfort here. This is not the pain of the past (earlier we learn “The pain has / vanished”) but a present pain, one caused by forced reflection and proximity. The linear juxtaposition reflects the uncomfortable nearness of father and son; or, to put it another way, there is no protective barrier here. This six-word line contains all of the discomfort and fear of the moment. One is reminded of the “scared blood at the eardrums”. The speaker’s instinct is to turn, and the line ends on that word. But in point of fact, this “turn” in the poem is also a turnabout. Using enjambment to surprise and refocus the reader, Thomas uses the literal “turn” of the line as a kind of retort, very nearly an act of reproach as the speaker “turn[s] / to recriminate”. However, the act of recrimination is not ultimately directed toward the son as the reader momentarily suspects. Another pointed use of lineation turns, or *re*-turns, that reproach back to the speaker at the end of the line: “I turn /to recriminate. *That likeness*” (italics added). Lineation suggests that the speaker is turning not on the son, but on the likeness, and therefore ultimately on himself. Thus, lineation adds complexity to meaning. It asks the reader to track the uneasy thought processes, the reflections (one recalls Ginsberg’s words: “thought stops, breath-stops, runs of inspiration, changes of mind, startings and stoppings of the car”).

¹²⁹ One notes that the autonomy of each individual line decreases not only because of enjambment, but also because the initial word of each line is not capitalized. “Careers” is the only poem in the volume with non-capitalized line headings but it gives the reader a preview of a stylistic feature that becomes the rule, rather than the exception, in later volumes, beginning in *Laboratories of the Spirit* (1975). In fact, one suspects that although it is the first poem in *Not That He Brought Flowers*, “Careers” was probably one of the last to be written.

And, as in many of the poems written at Elgwys-fach, the prosody requires the reader to stay attentive and involved as he or she makes moment-to-moment, interpretive adjustments.

Although we have used the term “the speaker” in our reading of “Careers”, the poem is very probably in the voice of R. S. Thomas, speaking, at the end, to his son Gwydion. With its admission of personal pain, and in particular a pain which is associated with family, the poem approaches (though it does not quite become) Confessionalism. Indeed, Thomas’s response to the Confessional poets deserves further comment. Among the American poets he was reading in *Critical Quarterly*, the Confessionals in particular would have given him poignant examples of how prosody might be used to explore individual psychology and the inner self. The Confessionals certainly gave him a model, as very little of contemporary British poetry could have done, for inner expression and a form appropriate to intimate, private subject matter. In fact, Thomas’s poem “The Cure” (PS 41) seems to allude to the Confessionals:

Doctors in verse
Being scarce now, most poets
Are their own patients, compelled to treat
Themselves first; their complaint being
Peculiar always.

Again, lineation emphasizes key words. The poets are “compelled to treat / [*whom do they treat?*] Themselves first; their complaint being / [*being what?*] Peculiar”. The word “peculiar” has at least two meanings here. The Confessional poets were certainly thought of as “strange” or “unusual” (one recalls our earlier discussion of Thomas as “a man apart”, labelled as “the Ogre of Wales”, “a freak”), but “peculiar” also means distinctive, idiosyncratic, inimitable. From a stylistic point of view, the “complaints” of the Confessionals—indeed of all poets whose form is an extension of content—are “peculiar” in this way. Modern American poetry, in the years following World War II, had been on the whole impersonal, dedicated to exploring the exterior world, but the

Confessional poets reopened American poetry to self-exploration; indeed, their poems became the very site of exploration, a way into the interior, and R. S. Thomas would have been drawn to this. For example, Brown mentions the similarity between the “bleak moods” of “Welsh Border” (BT 9)—

It is a dark night, but noisy.
Cars pass on the road.
Their lights dissect me.
[.]
The real fight goes on
In the mind; protect me,
Spirits, from myself.

and the world of Robert Lowell’s “Skunk Hour”.¹³⁰

One dark night,
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill’s skull;
I watched for love cars. Lights turned down,
they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .
My mind’s not right.¹³¹

Indeed, beyond the “moods”, the poems share both imagery—dark night, cars, lights—and a focus on the speaker’s mental state. And Lowell’s possessive construction, “hill’s skull” would find itself at home in almost any R. S. Thomas poem. This is not to suggest that R. S. Thomas was responding directly to Lowell (whose poem, unlike “Welsh Border”, uses end-rhyme) though it is possible.¹³² The importance, however, lies in the relationship between poetry and introspection, the *act* of poetry as much as the created verbal structure.

¹³⁰ R. S. Thomas 73.

¹³¹ *Selected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) 95.

¹³² “Skunk Hour” was first published in 1957, then collected in *Life Studies* (1959). The poem itself did not appear in *Critical Quarterly*, but it is Lowell’s best-known poem, and it received a great deal of critical attention in the late 50s and early 60s. One doubts, however, if Thomas was consciously responding to Lowell. “Skunk Hour” probably represents a form of words that Thomas had read and stored in the subconscious, a form that he associated with the particular mood of “Welsh Border”. It is notable, however, that Thomas compares himself to Lowell in an interview with Simon Barker, both distancing himself from the Confessionals and admitting to being emotion-driven: “God forbid that I should write confessional verse, like Robert Lowell descended into, but this is the debit side of leading a country, semi-reclusive existence, *that you do tend to fall back on your own emotions*” (quoted in Simon Barker, *Probing the God-Space: R. S. Thomas’s Poetry of Religious Experience* [Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wales, Lampeter, 1991] 316, italics added).

One wishes to make a distinction, however. R. S. Thomas, despite his increasing tendency to explore the self, is not a Confessional poet. The nakedness he approaches in “Careers” is not typical. Hooker’s contrast between “ego-experience”, which he applies to the Confessionals, and “the experience of relationship”, which takes in “all kinds of relationships, between the self and the world, the self and the nonself” is helpful.¹³³ R. S. Thomas’s work surely takes in both kinds of experience, but his exploration of self is usually expressed as an “experience of relationships”—between the self and others, the self and nature, the self and Wales, the self and God. These comparisons are tenuous and always shifting because the poet’s sense of self is also tenuous. As a result, there can be very little self-confession in Thomas’s work; indeed, one can argue that the only confession Thomas *can* make about his identity—and it is a confession that he makes often—is that he does not *have* a firm identity:

But there’s an underlying despair
Of what should be most certain in my life:
This hard image that is reflected
in mirrors and in the eyes of my friends.
(“Who?” P 39)

Here one recalls the eye/I pairing of “Careers” and the “mirror” held up to the poet, but there is a clear (or rather, unclear) expression of uncertainty, of strangeness. Despite a poetry that approaches Confessionalism at times, there is always something held back in Thomas’s work, a way of “safeguarding the integrity of his inwardness even in the process of making it public”.¹³⁴ According to Hooker, “even in the seemingly naked lyric, expressing personal experience, there is an area of mystery, an indefinable transforming alchemy, between the I of the poem and the identity of the man”.¹³⁵ And Prys-Williams, who has combed Thomas’s work for autobiographical elements, observes that “Thomas worked to exacting standards of honesty in his self-disclosure, but an important index of

¹³³ Quoted in David Lloyd, *Writing on the Edge: Interviews with Writers and Editors of Wales*, Costerus New Series 112 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997) 43.

¹³⁴ M. Wynn Thomas, “Time’s Changeling”: Autobiography in *The Echoes Return Slow* 187.

¹³⁵ Review of *H’m*, *Poetry Wales* 7.4 (1972): 91-2.

the privacy of his nature was the tortuous route he sometimes took to self revelation".¹³⁶ This is an important distinction. Thomas did not put himself on display. The poems are not presented as unmediated revelations about his life. Certainly there are, as we have discussed, autobiographical elements therein, but these exist because the poems are sites of self-exploration, not vehicles for direct confession. This is yet another reason why personality criticism is dangerous. It can lead one to make more of an exploratory poem than one should, to mistake a journey for a destination.

Before moving on to a discussion of Thomas's public poetry, we should reemphasize some differences between the linear prosody that emerged at Eglwys-fach and Thomas's earlier prosodies, taking the opportunity to point out the implications of some critical responses that occurred as Thomas evolved as a stylist. One recalls that unlike Thomas's linear prosody, his accentual prosody at Manafon *slowed* momentum; the stress-heavy, plodding lines mirrored the hard slog of hill farmers and the tactile landscape in which Thomas attempted to "root" his poems. Also, in Thomas's accentual syllabic and accentual prosodies, there was more end-line punctuation; enjambment, when it did occur, was less flexible, more closely aligned with syntax. The poems were also more overtly sonic, featuring comparatively more internal and end-rhyme, assonance, etc. These earlier prosodies, more in line with established British conventions, did not draw much negative response from critics. Critics did not discuss the style of the early work, in part because the style did not ruffle many critical feathers. This was not the case with the poems written at Eglwys-fach.

Because linear prosody was not commonplace in Britain, critics and poets struggled to make sense of Thomas's style. Sam Adams, commenting on the poems in *Pietà* (1966), writes:

¹³⁶*Twentieth Century Autobiography* 120.

Though there are poems written in stanzas, poems that rhyme, it nevertheless appears from the bulk of his work that R. S. Thomas has an under-developed sense of form. There is no rhyme in any of the four poems we are about to consider. There is no syllabic consistency [. . .], there is no observable pattern of stress. Occasionally one wonders what logic of sound or sense prompts him to break a line at a particular point.¹³⁷

Adams equates “form” with rhyme, a consistent syllable count, or an overt stress pattern, none of which drive Thomas’s linear prosody. One is reminded of Eliot’s statement about free verse: “I can define it only in negatives: (1) absence of pattern, (2) absence of rhyme, (3) absence of metre”. Reviewers and critics were not used to Thomas’s linear techniques and, as a result, tended to focus on what they were not. Such a focus can be an effective undertaking if it leads one to a further examination of what the poet *is* doing. For instance, by altering Rich’s lineation and observing it as prose and syntax verse, respectively, we were able to better appreciate the effects of the poem’s actual lineation. But critics have generally stopped short, either dismissing Thomas’s style or ignoring it in favour of the poet’s subject matter. Even today, in an environment where linear prosodies are ubiquitous in Britain, Thomas is perhaps considered a major poet more because of his subject matter than his style. But one wishes to change this perception. Without a prosody that demands the reader’s attention, Thomas’s poems would not affect the reader as they do. They would not, no matter *what* they said, be memorable at all if there were not something impressive (in both senses of that word) about *how* he said them. Gwyn Jones is one of the rare critics to have commented on the indissoluble relationship between Thomas’s prosody and the staying power of his poems:

I wonder whether he is the finest, conscious craftsman writing verse in English today. [. . .] I read fairly large-sized acreages of verse, especially in periodicals and the rest of it, and then at the end of it so what? Clever, smart, nothing, forgotten it. Now with Thomas you don’t do that at all. Whether you like a poem of Thomas’s, or whether you don’t like it, my word, *it stays in your memory* and it turns around somewhere in your vitals,

¹³⁷ “A Note on Four Poems”, *Poetry Wales* 7.4 (1972): 75.

*because he is a master of the conjunction of lines, and he is a master therefore of the stanza.*¹³⁸

The importance of the connection Jones is making here—between “the conjunction of lines” and the poem’s effectiveness as a communicative, memorable prosody—cannot be overstated. Thomas’s lineation is so important, in fact, that one can understand why he accused those reviewers and columnists who did not discuss his prosody (that is, all of them) of laziness, or at least inattentiveness. One recalls the comment, quoted earlier, about reviewers “picking out a bit of subject matter” and ignoring his “poetic excellencies”; similarly, he tells Lethbridge, “some of the nuances [of my poetry] are lost by these careless columnists and people”.¹³⁹ As Gwyn Jones suggests, whether or not one likes the subject matter of a poem, or its persona (*cf.* our earlier discussion of personality criticism), Thomas’s skill as a craftsman *must* be reckoned with. Leslie Norris, for example, did not often admire R. S. Thomas’s poetry, but he did admire his skill.¹⁴⁰ Similar distinctions may help establish the credibility of Thomas’s more vocal detractors. As it stands, most critics have either dismissed the prosody or, more commonly, simply elected not to engage with it.

While it would surely be an exaggeration to suggest that every critic who fails to notice Thomas’s linear technique does so intentionally, one is nevertheless sceptical of critics who, rather than approaching a balanced discussion of Thomas’s technique, choose to treat his poems like eccentric aberrations, setting aside his lineation as “chopped prose”¹⁴¹ or, even more obtusely, the “typographic convention” of an

¹³⁸ “R.S. Thomas at Seventy”, Broadcast on BBC Radio 3, 7 Dec. 1983. Reproduced from M. J. J. van Buuren, *Waiting: The Religious Poetry of Ronald Stuart Thomas, Welsh Priest and Poet*, 179, italics added.

¹³⁹ “R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge” 46.

¹⁴⁰ Personal correspondence, 18 Sept. 2004: “I have to admit I never liked the man and, while often admiring his skill, do not admire the poetry”. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Norris, in addition to being a poet of some reputation himself, spent many decades teaching in America and was an expert on American free verse.

¹⁴¹ According to Andrew Waterman, “[Thomas’s later work] is written in a sort of cadenced free verse consisting of short unrhymed lines and I find in the later work, what I don’t find in the early work, though quite often it does seem to read simply like chopped-up prose, it seems to lose tautness and rhythm control” (“R.S. Thomas at Seventy”, *Waiting: The Religious Poetry of Ronald Stuart Thomas* 177-8). Similarly,

“essayist” masquerading as a poet.¹⁴² Such descriptions are flippant, elitist and, in terms of literary criticism, fundamentally flawed. Even if Thomas *were* dividing prose paragraphs into lines (which he patently is not), those lines might not rise to the level of poetry, but neither would they be prose. As Holder observes, lineation itself can create poetic effects because it “presents us with relatively few words at a time to absorb”, which heightens our awareness of, and attention to, individual words. He adds that lineation also signifies that “we are in the presence of poetry” and changes the way we approach a text.¹⁴³ Of course a poem will not succeed solely by creating reader expectations, but lineated structures create them nevertheless. In a related manner, Karl Shapiro and Robert Beum observe that,

The positions of greatest emphasis in a sentence are the end and the beginning, in that order. These same points are emphatic in any unit: phrase, clause, or poetic line. If a sentence, then, is broken into lines, it obtains several additional points of emphasis.¹⁴⁴

Thus, lineation alone changes the way we read verbal structures, and these changes increase exponentially when that lineation, as in the case of R. S. Thomas, is a carefully-rendered prosody, rich with gradations of meaning. One wonders, then: should not Thomas’s reviewers be focusing on what the poet *is* doing, rather than what he *used* to do or, worse yet, what they *wish* he was doing? To be sure, not all of R. S. Thomas’s poems are stylistically successful. Such is the case with any poet, and one is not foolish enough to suggest that every R. S. Thomas poem is a commendable achievement. As we will discuss in the next chapter, Thomas aligned his poetry with experimentation, and not

Belinda Humfrey calls the work of *Laboratories of the Spirit* (1975) “an arbitrary chopping up of prose to a semblance of poetry” (*Anglo-Welsh Review* 56 [1976]: 172). Waterman and Humfrey may have in mind the words of Pound, who argued that the poet should not “try to shirk all the difficulties of the unspeakably difficult art of good prose by chopping [one’s] composition into line lengths” (from *A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste* [1912], collected in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence S. Rainey [Malden, MA: Blackwell 2005] 95).

¹⁴² John Wain, *Professing Poetry* 107: “Since it so obviously isn’t verse, why is it offered as such? After all, there is nothing to be ashamed of in writing prose, especially when one writes it as well as [D. J.] Enright or Mr Thomas. But is that really what the art of poetry has come down to—a typographic convention, allowing a certain class of essayist to be classified as a poet?”

¹⁴³ *Rethinking Meter* 140.

¹⁴⁴ *A Prosody Handbook* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 51.

every experiment is a successful one. But surely examining *where* a line is broken, and *why* the grammatical phrase is broken there, and *what* elements of that sentence are grouped together on a given line are all more useful undertakings than dismissing his lineation out of hand, “tak[ing] refuge in laughter and derision”.¹⁴⁵ If a poem fails, a close reading can reveal *why* it fails, which can be every bit as important as revealing why a poem succeeds. But, let us be clear: any critique that alleges an inattentiveness to craft, or that assumes stylistic ignorance on the part of the poet, is a non-starter.

In this vein, the contrast between Thomas’s American-influenced poetry and the work of his contemporaries (*i.e.* the Movement poets) deserves further comment. In his book *The Movement* (1980), Blake Morrison discusses the work of these poets—Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, D. J. Enright, Thom Gunn, John Wain, and Elizabeth Jennings—arguing that they comprised “a group of considerable importance—probably the most influential in England since the Imagists”.¹⁴⁶ Some critics have, on occasion, linked R. S. Thomas to the Movement, largely due to the clarity of register in his early work (as compared, for example, to the less lucid writing of his countryman Dylan Thomas). James Knapp writes,

Although he was not a member of the Movement, R.S. Thomas was always admired by Movement poets for the qualities of clarity and economy which his verse had displayed as early as 1946, when his first volume of poetry was published. Like many of the Movement poets, Thomas saw his role as that of an intelligent and responsible member of a community [. . .].¹⁴⁷

Knapp, however, is arguing Thomas’s figurative connection to the Movement in 1971, the year before Thomas published *H’m*, a volume that, as we will see, offended the formal aesthetic of some Movement poets. And while R. S. Thomas did feel a responsibility *to* a community, Knapp is incorrect in his assertion that Thomas ever

¹⁴⁵ “R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge” 46.

¹⁴⁶ *The Movement* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1980) 6. Several other poets have been linked to the Movement (which was never an official organization), but the writers Morrison includes are those most typically associated with it.

¹⁴⁷ James F. Knapp, “The Poetry of R. S. Thomas”, *Twentieth Century Literature* 17.1 (Jan. 1971): 1.

realized himself as a member *of* a community; again, Thomas's idea of a Welsh "community" did not exist in the reality of Modern Wales. It existed only in his imagination. And *pace* Ward's argument that one can hear, in the poems written at Eglwys-fach, "echoes of the laconic-polite English poets of the fifties",¹⁴⁸ Thomas's poetry will not fit nicely into a study of the Movement poets, and his work was not "always admired" among them, largely due to his later stylistic choices.

Many Movement poets *were* kindly-disposed toward Thomas's *early* work. For example, Kingsley Amis claimed in the 13 January, 1956 issue of *The Spectator* that Thomas was "one of the half dozen best poets now writing in English", and that Thomas's poetry "reduces most modern verse to footling whimsy".¹⁴⁹ In this same piece, however, Amis had this to say about Thomas's style:

[R. S. Thomas] shares with [Edward Thomas and Andrew Young] a fondness for rural subject matter and, *stylistically, a contempt for modernist shock tactics, whether emotional or intellectual*.¹⁵⁰

We have certainly shown that R. S. Thomas "has something in common" with Edward Thomas, and interesting parallels *can* be drawn with the work of Andrew Young.¹⁵¹ Ironically, however, we have also shown that R. S. Thomas's later, "modernist" tendencies—tendencies which the stylistically-conservative Movement poets rejected—*derive* in part from his close reading of Edward Thomas. And while one cannot know for certain what Amis has in mind by "modernist shock tactics", R. S. Thomas certainly

¹⁴⁸ *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas* 71. It is unlikely that Thomas ever considered himself as part of this group, either. For one, he would have considered the Movement poetic as too overtly English. It is the *accessibility* of his early work, especially as compared to the work of Dylan Thomas and the Neo Romantics, that has caused some critics to associate him with the Movement, but his differing style, as well as his involvement with *Critical Quarterly*, shows that his interests lay elsewhere.

¹⁴⁹ "A True Poet", collected in *Critical Writings of R. S. Thomas*, ed. Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1982) 29-30, italics added. Rupert Hart-Davis featured this quotation not just on the book jacket of future printings of *Song at the Year's Turning*, but also on the jacket of each subsequent R. S. Thomas volume he published.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Like R. S. Thomas, Andrew Young drew his images and metaphors from "Celtic" landscapes (Scottish, as opposed to Welsh). Also like R. S. Thomas, Young was a vicar in the Anglican Church, and biblical language and metaphor appear in his work. Stylistically, Young's rhythms are similar to those of the early R. S. Thomas; in particular, Young makes use of "stress clusters" in a similar manner to that which we outlined in Chapter 2.

developed a proclivity for a style that *did* embrace the “modern”, the “emotional”, and the “intellectual”, and his “tactics”, or prosody, did indeed shock many critics. It perhaps comes as no surprise, then, that Amis remained curiously silent about Thomas’s post-1950s work. Worth noting is a 1974 piece in *The Observer*, where Amis mentions poets he likes to read while drinking Scotch because “they share [. . .] immediacy, density, strength in a sense analogous to that in which the Scotch is strong”. Among the work Amis includes is “*the early* R. S. Thomas”.¹⁵²

Philip Larkin, for his part, was a Movement poet who didn’t care for Thomas’s early *or* late poetry, and who apparently disliked R. S. Thomas himself. He famously called him “Arse Thomas” and “Arse-wipe Thomas” in his letters (letters which also include a scatological jest regarding Thomas’s use of colons),¹⁵³ and he has this to say in his review of *Poetry for Supper*:

There is no doubt Mr. Thomas is the kind of poet one would like to be good, because he avoids a great many ways of being bad, but I find in this collection little sense of the inner organisation that gives a poem cohesion [. . .]. Mr. Thomas’s admirers seem to me to be mistaking sympathetic subject matter and good intentions for evidence of real poetic talent.¹⁵⁴

In other words, the problem was with form, not content. Thomas’s prosody lacked “inner organization” and “cohesion”. And Larkin’s problems with Thomas’s form were echoed by other Movement poets. Kingsley Amis may have remained silent about Thomas’s later work, but Donald Davie and John Wain certainly did not. These two poets, in fact, were particularly severe, and this despite the fact that they, like Amis, had

¹⁵² Quoted in Martin Amis, *Experience: A Memoir* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2000) 336, italics added. It should be mentioned that Thomas is not the only poet to receive selective approval from Amis, who also includes “parts of Graves”, “the early Tennyson”, and “parts of Robert Frost”. John Betjeman and Phillip Larkin are accepted without any qualifications.

¹⁵³ Anthony Thwaite, ed. *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin, 1940-1985* (London: Faber, 1992) 260; 341. In a letter to C. B. Cox, written on 23 Feb. 1972, Larkin writes, “I am interested to hear of your plans for CRITICAL QUARTERLY – is it in those chaste pages that you intend to launch this polemic? Jolly good stuff: better than counting the colons in R.S. Thomas” (453).

¹⁵⁴ *Guardian* 5 Sep. 1958, 6. Larkin is correct, in a sense: Readers and critics *have* avoided discussing the merits of the poetry *as poetry*, focusing much more on subject matter and intentions. This thesis clearly demonstrates that there *is* a great deal of “real poetic talent” in Thomas’s work, but until a sustained dialogue continues these stylistic examinations, there will be comparatively little evidence to refute Larkin’s assessment.

been positive about Thomas's earlier work. In his often insightful, yet too-often pretentious book *Professing Poetry* (1977), John Wain, in a chapter called "On the Breaking of Forms", calls Thomas "a particularly depressing example of the damage caused to a poet's work by the flight from form".¹⁵⁵ And in a 1987 piece, Donald Davie, perhaps the closest thing we have to a Movement spokesperson, calls Thomas's use of enjambment "ruthless", describing it as "a tic, a mannerism" and goes on to say that "we may legitimately protest that a respectable prosody must comprehend a good deal more than this". Davie adds, "Like John Wain I find Thomas handling [the English verse-line] with a peculiar gracelessness [. . .]. That is of course, and is meant to be, a damaging comment".¹⁵⁶ This is the same Donald Davie who, in 1974, accused British poets of a "painful modesty of intention",¹⁵⁷ yet his deference to Wain, along with his own dismissive comments about R. S. Thomas, causes one to wonder how much perceived immodesty Davie was actually willing to tolerate since Thomas's prosodic intentions were, by 1974, let alone 1987, anything but modest.

Davie and Wain clearly rejected what they saw as a radical stylistic change in Thomas's work of the early 70s, but in actual fact, nothing radical took place with the publication of *H'm* (1972). As we will see in the next chapter, the changes in that volume

¹⁵⁵ *Professing Poetry* 107. One wonders if Wain could have honestly believed what he was writing, namely that a poet for whom he had expressed admiration had suddenly taken flight from form, abandoned it, laid it aside. Thomas rightly protested: "It's a kind of reaction I think that the later work has tended to be dismissed. You get people like John Wain dismissing it and talking about my 'collapse of form', something like this, you know, which to me is meaningless. You expect something better from the Professor of Poetry at Oxford" (Barker, *Probing the God-Space* 329). In the same chapter, Wain (perhaps predictably) offers Philip Larkin's work as a contrast to that of R. S. Thomas, heaping praise on "the delicacy of Mr Larkin's eye and ear for form" (109).

¹⁵⁶ "R. S. Thomas's Poetry of the Church of Wales" *Miraculous Simplicity* 138. Davie's comments are perhaps even more surprising than Wain's since Davie, by the time he wrote this piece, had been living and teaching in the United States for nearly two decades and should have been quite familiar with the American free verse tradition to which Thomas was responding. However, it is worth quoting an excerpt from a piece Davie wrote in 1972 (again, the same year Thomas published *H'm*): "One is tempted to say that for years now British poetry and American poetry haven't been on speaking terms. But the truth is rather that they haven't been on *hearing* terms—the American reader can't hear the British poet, neither his rhythms nor his tone of voice, and the British reader only pretends to hear the rhythms and the tone of American poetry since William Carlos Williams. And so what we have had for some years now is a breakdown in communication between these two English-speaking poetries, *though for civility's sake the appearance of a continuing dialogue between them is maintained*", italics added. From *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (New York: Oxford UP, 1972) 184.

¹⁵⁷ *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* 11.

were significant, but were essentially an evolution, not a revolution. After all, Larkin, as we have just seen, was saying similar things in 1958. And Larkin, it must be said, was *correct* in his review to the extent that Thomas's linear prosody is not "cohesive" and "organized" in the accepted way of 1950s British forms. In fact, in terms of dates, Larkin has it about right. R. S. Thomas began to move away from the "respectable prosody" of mainstream English poetry about the time he arrived at Eglwys-fach. This was his own "movement", one that was clearly out of step with Movement poet-critics, but one that hardly made him devoid of "real poetic talent". To paraphrase Davie, Thomas's prosody *does* "comprehend a great deal more" than "ruthless" lineation, even if Davie himself does not.

It comes as no surprise that, when R. S. Thomas first relaxed, then abandoned, the established conventions of English poetry, the critics cried foul. While one cannot positively know their motivation, these critics appear to be examples of a general pattern of dismissal that seemed to occur whenever the poet ventured outside of what M. Wynn Thomas calls the "tiny space" afforded him "in the Great British mentality". Wales, according to M. Wynn Thomas, is "managed" as part of the "British system's self-serving programme of containment", and Britain "has successfully contrived to produce a lesser R. S. Thomas to suit its own tastes and purposes".¹⁵⁸ An example of this can be found in the above-mentioned piece by Benedict Nightingale, who is drawn to a poetry grounded in "the instinctual life of the Welsh peasants, rooted deep in earth", but is quick to point out that *The Bread of Truth* (1963), Thomas's "latest tome", "has not been well-received". Nightingale all but accuses the poet of ingratitude towards his champions by explaining that, after all, it was Thomas's poems about the hill farmer that "won him the embarrassment of fame", and he concludes his piece in this manner:

¹⁵⁸ "Reviewing R. S. Thomas" 5.

His latest book of poems has been criticized for self-absorption and a tendency to regard other people as mere food for his own problems. One wonders if his new parish, which is largely residential and much more “respectable” than his earlier one, may not tend to rob him of rewarding subject matter and turn him too far in on himself. If so, we shall all be the losers.¹⁵⁹

The idea (however erroneous it may have proven to be) that Thomas’s poetry will decline in quality if he “robs” it of its “rewarding subject matter” is fairly straightforward. But there is also a subtext to Nightingale’s argument: he suggests that an inward-looking poetry, one that examines “[the poet’s] own problems”—or a socially conscious poetry, one that points out *other* people’s problems—goes “too far”; or at least it goes too far when it begins to examine the problems of “respectable” people rather than hill farmers whose lives are “too far” away to make London critics uncomfortable (“Too far for you to see / The fluke and the foot-rot and the fat maggot / Gnawing the skin from the small bones”).¹⁶⁰ The double standard is palpable: using the problems of “respectable” people as “mere food” is out of bounds. The problems of farmers, by way of contrast, are “rewarding subject matter” of which the poems should not be “robbed”. In like manner, as we have clearly seen, the stylistic changes of the period went “too far” for many critics, who did not wish to contend with linear prosodies they did not immediately comprehend.

But none of this swayed the poet. Subject matter chose R. S. Thomas, not the other way round, so critics needn’t have bothered trying to manoeuvre him. There was, throughout Thomas’s entire career, a progressive tendency in the work, both in subject matter and technique. He was “not part of the public”, and neither was his style. To return to Larkin’s terminology, R. S. Thomas was not interested in being “organised” when that organization was defined by others. He was aware of artistic trends, certainly, but he was not loyal to them, and his unconventional linear techniques become more

¹⁵⁹ *Guardian* 4 March 1964, 9.

¹⁶⁰ “The Welsh Hill Country” (AL 7).

pronounced, not less, during the 1970s, even in the face of increasing critical dismissal.

“As you get older you realise the only important thing is to write a good poem”, he tells Timothy Wilson. “What does it matter what anyone says?”¹⁶¹

Public Poetry

In a 1990 interview, Ned Thomas offers an intriguing view of Welsh Romanticism and a premise for the origins of Welsh writing in English. He cites the work of Tecwyn Lloyd,¹⁶² who asserts that the beginnings of Anglo-Welsh literature can be traced to the nineteenth-century writings of English travellers, who viewed Celtic Wales from an outsider’s perspective, writing with the “clichés of Wales, tourists’ perceptions: castles, sheep, druids”. Ned Thomas specifically refers to Matthew Arnold’s *Lectures on Celtic Literature*. In the opening passage, Arnold stands on the Great Orme at Llandudno. From that vantage point, he can look east to the area between Llandudno and Liverpool and see a Wales of “practical industry”. Looking west, he sees “mists and mountains and Celtic magic”. For Arnold, that view to the industrial east was not Wales, but intrusive England. The real Wales was in the west. According to Tecwyn Lloyd, that vision of a magic, Celtic land was eventually integrated into Welsh culture and became the very substance of national thought. Ned Thomas continues:

Welsh men and women were perceived from outside in a Romantic light and found to be picturesque, but later that same tradition is transplanted into our culture [. . .] and then an identification with place and people and mystical experience can become a Welsh Romanticism. English Romanticism is the author of many of the clichéd perceptions of Wales which are then taken up, Tecwyn Lloyd argued—and I think rightly—by numbers of Welsh writers writing in English. But the other side of

¹⁶¹ *Guardian* 15 Sept. 1972, 8. Whether disapproving critics and reviewers actually believed they could influence Thomas’s work is doubtful. After all, by the time they began to comment on changes in the poetry, those changes had already taken place. Their reviews can more usefully be read as public statements of aesthetic. Almost without exception, they reveal more about the reviewers than what is ostensibly being reviewed.

¹⁶² “The Romantic Parody” *Planet* 31 (March 1976): 29-36.

Romanticism is that it can be transplanted and become a powerful vehicle for national feeling.¹⁶³

That Welsh Romanticism ultimately has an English, rather than a Welsh, source is certainly a hypothesis that R. S. Thomas would have vehemently rejected. But his own, early experience was much like that of Matthew Arnold, looking westward into a magical Wales. One recalls his early “Celtic longing”, and that his Romanticized visions of Wales were, as we have demonstrated, those of an outsider looking in, of one who initially viewed Wales from Liverpool, and subsequently as a dreaming student on a train. His early, sub-Georgian poems, full of clichés and written in an outmoded style, are perhaps something not very different from travel writings. He *was* (practically, if not by birth) an English outsider travelling into Wales. Thus, whatever one thinks about Tecwyn Lloyd’s conclusions regarding the origins of Welsh writing in English, his ideas seem quite appropriate in the case of R. S. Thomas, whose Romantic views came largely from Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*, the *English Romanticism* of Keats, Shelley, and early Tennyson. And these views *were* “transplanted”, first into Welsh landscapes and then into his own interior landscapes. Indeed, those internalized, Romantic views became the very substance of his Welsh nationalism, “a powerful vehicle for national feeling”.

R. S. Thomas’s parishioners were clearly out of tune with the “true Wales of [his] imagination”, but as Thomas was perfectly willing to admit, it was he who was, by choice, out of tune with the existent (as opposed to the imagined) Wales. He was caustic towards both English “in-migrants” and the Welsh that perpetuated “snobbery, jealousy and love of money” (A 65). “I’ve lived, on the whole, among deprived people”, he tells Lethbridge. “I mean, the moral character you know isn’t as it should be and so on. So that I do tend to take rather, possibly, a pessimistic attitude towards them”.¹⁶⁴ This pessimism, he goes on to say, comes from observing human greed and materialism, the

¹⁶³ Interview with David Lloyd, *Writing on the Edge* 14-15.

¹⁶⁴ “R. S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge” 41.

tendency to deplete the natural world, the need to grow rich. “At some stage man took a wrong turning”, he says. “I can see that man has displayed tremendous courage at times. But I’m still inclined to think in terms of a fallen creature”.¹⁶⁵ At Eglwys-fach, Thomas perceived not a community of countrymen but a microcosm of a “fallen” society: disingenuous, avaricious, snidely pretentious, and ultimately misguided. The barrier syndrome led him to internalize and protect his vision of Wales, but it also led him to take aim at those who threatened it, strike out at them via the many socio-political, nationalist poems of the period. The poet Geoffrey Hill seems to have picked up on this relationship between Thomas’s Welsh longing and his nationalism. He writes, “The sense of perception that unites [R. S. Thomas’s] poetry is *hiraeth*. It is not inevitable that *hiraeth* will draw you into contemplation and expression of political vision, but it is not unlikely that it will”.¹⁶⁶

The nationalist poems, then, grew out of Thomas’s more local discontent, but one hastens to add that a climate already existed for socio-political verse. There was a swelling of nationalist activity in Wales after 1962, following Saunders Lewis’s famous radio address *Tynged yr Iaith*, which warned of the extinction of the dying Welsh language if action wasn’t taken. That same year, the Welsh Language Society (*Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg*) was formed at the Plaid Cymru summer school in Glamorgan. Perhaps the most dramatic development of this period came in 1966, when Gwynfor Evans became the first Member of Parliament to represent Plaid Cymru at Westminster, winning a by-election victory (this followed other strong performances by Plaid Cymru in the mining valleys). As part of these political developments, or perhaps as a response to them, R. S. Thomas began to write more overtly political, nationalist poems. Simply put, there was a public discourse to which he felt a need to contribute. One recalls Glyn Jones’s assertion that a Welsh poet is “part of the social fabric with an important function to perform”,

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 42; 41.

¹⁶⁶ Geoffrey Hill, “R. S. Thomas’s Welsh Pastoral”, *Echoes to the Amen* 44.

and at Eglwys-fach, R. S. Thomas begins to carry out this function unswervingly. His previous responses to the state of Wales reflected disillusionment and despair. Now they spring from anger and bitterness, casting a harsh light on what is ultimately infidelity to the Wales of his imagination.

In terms of stirring up controversy and social reaction, R. S. Thomas's public poems were very successful. Indeed, for good or ill, they helped to establish his reputation. From a stylistic point of view, however, the poems are much less accomplished than other, more personal works of the same period. The poems suffer under the shrill weight of their words and their harsh images. Brown, in pointing out the scatological references and graphic imagery in "Looking at Sheep" (BT 48) and "Reservoirs" (NBF 26), gives us a way into this discussion, arguing that Thomas's "strident, lurid images ultimately tend to unbalance the poems, to tip them" and bring them "closer to mere rhetoric than to poetry".¹⁶⁷ The poems are indeed "unbalanced", and they appear this way because they are *formally* unbalanced. Or, to modify Olson's expression, form is *not* an extension of content. That they are aggressive, and that their diction is often clamorous, discordant, and even melodramatic might not matter much if Thomas were writing prose, or a stronger, longer, more stress-heavy line that could contain such diction. One recalls that his accentual verse was able to contain "a libidinous relish for immersion in the liquid, glutinous and messy", where "Bilge, sweat and muck abound".¹⁶⁸ But the content of Thomas's public poetry is often *at odds* with his chosen prosody, specifically his flexible, lineated structures. The following, from "Reservoirs", is a good illustration of this incongruity:

There are the hills,

¹⁶⁷ R. S. Thomas 64.

¹⁶⁸ Ward, *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas* 39. In a similar vein, Robert Minhinnick writes that "R. S. Thomas's poetry cannot maintain the pressure of incorporating such matters without degenerating into a bitterness which all but destroys the writing's effect" ("Living with R. S. Thomas" 13).

Too; gardens gone under the scum
Of the forests;

Just as we have observed in many poems of this period, Thomas is attempting to use enjambment to subvert expectations. After finishing the line at “scum”, the reader is temporarily suspended, knowing only that the “scum” is responsible for overtaking the hills and gardens. The reader may be expecting something after the line break, but it is something that is more obviously “scum”, something we associate with scum—pollution, refuse, etc. It is only after the enjambment that the reader discovers that the “scum” is ostensibly from “the forests”, a usually positive word. One must readjust to realize that the poet sees the Forestry Commission’s artificially-planted trees as “scum”. However, this technique does not work nearly as well as it does in Thomas’s more introspective verse. In those poems, the reader is constantly re-evaluating, *replacing* interpretations “each moment of the going”. But in the context of “Reservoirs”, “scum” is unmistakably associated with both “strangers”, or English in-migrants, and the Welsh who stand by with serene expressions, “a watercolour’s appeal”. Thomas has already revealed that the poem’s imagery is a metaphor for “the subconscious / Of a people”. He has therefore shown his rhetorical hand, and the reader will not be convinced that the “scum”, a word whose connotations are entirely negative, was ever meant to apply to the forests. That which is visually, tactilely, and even scatologically unattractive is always a clearly revealed metaphor for the objects of Thomas’s invective: those who stifle his ideals. In this way the poem is also a good illustration of the claustrophobic vicar syndrome, the speaker stifled, uncomfortable, wanting to escape:

Where can I go, then, from the smell
Of decay, from the putrefying of a dead
Nation?

Again, however, the linear prosody is at odds with its content. As we have seen him do in other poems, Thomas attempts to subvert expectations and create surprise. Normally

one would expect a revolting smell on the shore to come from a dead animal, a fish or a drowned sheep perhaps. Lineation forces the reader to pause before realizing that the source of the stink is a dead Welsh nation. The speaker is suffocated by smell, and he is frustrated at not being able to create a barrier between the source of that smell and himself. But this is not a prosody that re-tunes itself moment-to-moment, responding to emotional or intellectual currents. This is prosody in service to a haranguing, and it does not function well as such. Robert Frost once wrote, “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader”.¹⁶⁹ This is a fitting way to describe the stylistic failures of much of the public poetry. The imagery and adjectives are so obviously “loaded”, so obviously seeking a simple, black and white response, that the lineation cannot counterbalance them by creating the ambiguities we see elsewhere. The point is that R. S. Thomas is not feeling his way, exploring himself. He *knows* what he thinks, and he expresses himself stridently in received images to which he knows very well what the reader response will be. Ironically, then, it is in the most public poems that that the poetic persona wears thinnest, and Thomas’s personal aversions, his “propagandistic intentions”, are laid bare. These remove surprise. These derail a prosody based on momentum and flexibility.

Linear counterpoint does not guarantee a successful poem any more than fourteen iambic pentameter lines always amount to a successful sonnet. Linear prosody, like any other prosody, can succeed or fail, depending on the poetic language and, more importantly, the poetic process. In Thomas’s searching, introspective poems, the forms seem like organic extensions of content while many of the socio-political poems appear contrived. One notes that even when a poem maintains momentum, or kinetics, its lurid diction can disrupt the linear push of the line:

¹⁶⁹ “The Figure a Poem Makes” *The Robert Frost Reader: Poetry and Prose* (New York: Holt, 2002) 440.

I want the town even,
 The open door
 Framing a slut,
 So she can speak Welsh
 And bear children
 To accuse the womb
 That bore me.
 ("Welsh" BT 15)

These lines are too harsh, too overt in their intention for the short, fast-moving lines.

"Framing a slut" in particular is very hard to get past because of its offensive and derogatory nature, to the extent that the otherwise lovely euphony of "accuse the womb" is lost beneath the harshness of the accusation itself.¹⁷⁰

Thomas's stylistic failures can therefore be attributed, at least in part, to his self-described "propagandistic intention". It is, in fact, perceptible *intention*, perhaps even more than propaganda, that can defeat linear prosody. Adrienne Rich reaches similar conclusions:

I find that I can no longer go to write a poem with a neat handful of materials and express those materials according to a prior plan: the poem engenders new sensations, new awareness in me *as it progresses*. Without for one moment turning my back on natural choice and selection, I have been increasingly willing to let the unconscious offer its materials, to listen to more than the one voice of a single idea [. . .].¹⁷¹

R. S. Thomas is not "listening" in these public poems, and when he appears to "express [his] materials according to a prior plan" rather than letting the poem dictate "new awareness [. . .] as it progresses", lineation and counterpoint do not function properly. We see this in several of the slightly later poems collected in *Welsh Airs* (1987). In the politically charged "Resort" (33), the speaker alludes to Proverbs 26:11 when he describes people "return[ing] to the vomit / Of the factories".¹⁷² In "Toast" (37), the poet returns to the language of a much earlier poem, "Welsh Landscape" (AL 26), where

¹⁷⁰ One is reminded of Thomas's response to his false Branwen, the mascara-daubed, "stupid, mocking slut" he mentions in his *Abercruwag* speech (SP 125).

¹⁷¹ "Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading" (1964), *Strong Words* 140, italics added.

¹⁷² KJV Prov. 26:11: "As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly".

he had described the Welsh as a people “Sick with inbreeding, / Worrying the carcase of an old song”. Four decades later, the “carcase” has rotted, become more repugnant:

I look at Wales now forty
 years on. Was there a chance,
 as some hoped, that maggots,
 burrowing in its carcase, would grow
 wings and take themselves off [. . .]?
 [.]
 The opposite happened.
 The stench, travelling on the wind
 out of the west, was the lure for more
 flies, befouling our winding-sheet
 with their droppings.

The intent of this poem is so obvious that one can scarcely read it as poetry. Instead, one reads it for what it is: socio-political commentary. Wales is dead, wrapped in a winding sheet. English (and Welsh) maggots remain, and English flies come to the stench, soiling the remains. Any subtleties of prosody are completely drowned out and rendered ineffective by what is *not* subtle: the strident, calculated imagery, and a lurid language that elbows the reader toward a single meaning.

One does not wish to suggest that a poem cannot succeed when the poet comes to the page with intent. Writing a poem requires intent, though perhaps not a conscious one. But a poet who allows what is being told to overshadow the manner of its telling may very well render that telling obsolete. Rather than the “crystalisation” of experience, such a poem is perceived as engineered experience. And anything that appears engineered, or contrived, does not function well in a communicative prosody, one where an organic “energy transfer” of experience is the aim. To paraphrase Keats, it is the palpability of the design, or intent, rather than the design itself that can wreck a poem.¹⁷³ Of the essence in all poetry, this idea is particularly important in free verse, where the relationship between form and content is not necessarily based on convention:

¹⁷³ “We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us” (Letter from John Keats to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 Feb. 1818 [extract], printed in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998] 1021).

Because the reader cannot pretend to account for its rhythms in abstract isolation, free verse confronts him directly with the complex relation of rhythm to meaning. It forces him back into the poem; and that is where he has always belonged.¹⁷⁴

R. S. Thomas's public poetry often disrupts the fragile, complex balance between rhythm and meaning, drawing the reader *out of* the poem, rather than "forc[ing] him back into the poem", where he or she could confront its adaptable, changing rhythms.

It is important to reemphasize that Thomas was aware of the risk he was taking in his public poetry. That he was clearly weighing the potential detriment to his development as a lyric poet (and to his lyrical poems) is evident as early as 1946. In a prose piece published in Keidrych Rhys's *Wales*, "Some Contemporary Scottish Writing", Thomas writes of "the necessity for politics" in verse, arguing that an "authentic note" will never be reached in Welsh poetry unless "the grip" of England, and the "yes-men" who kow-tow to English influence, is broken. A poet, according to Thomas, cannot afford to "luxuriate in the privacy of his own lyrical garden" when there are larger things at stake, and he asserts that "the cultivating of one's own poetic individuality" is a sign of "a failure to grow up and begin the wooing of a more exacting lover" (*SP* 29-30). It is interesting, however, that Thomas's political vision did not fully enter the poems until roughly two decades after he made this remark. In fact, in his 1964 analysis of R. S. Thomas's work, R. George Thomas applauds the poet for "learn[ing] to keep political attitudes out of his poetry"¹⁷⁵ and, after citing these same nationalist comments, writes that "As so frequently happens the poet's prose statements about his poetic intention run somewhat contrary to the reader's actual experience of his verse".¹⁷⁶ Presumably, Thomas had held back on his polemic *not* because he was luxuriating in his lyrical garden,

¹⁷⁴ Hartman, *Free Verse* 28.

¹⁷⁵ R. S. Thomas, Bibliographical series of supplements to British book news on writers and their work, no. 166 (London: Longmans Green, 1964) 29-30.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 28.

but because he was struggling with something else which he mentions in "Some Contemporary Scottish Writing":

The poet's chief problem is, how in virtue of his mind can he best save his country—directly through political action, or indirectly through his creative work? Failure to resolve this difficulty leads to frustration and inertia. (SP 33)

Thomas's poetry written at Manafon mainly addresses nationalist issues "indirectly", through unsentimental portraits, images of modernized or emptied farms, and cheerless reflections on a lost Wales such as "There is no present in Wales / And no future" ("Welsh Landscape" *AL* 26). But more aggressive political strains, however indirectly or infrequently they enter the earlier poems, permeate, unbalance and, it must be said, damage much of the public poetry written at Eglwys-fach. Thomas was aware of these risks, accepted them. And yet, the arc of R. S. Thomas's development still led him inward. The public poems were necessary to the defence of his imaginative and artistic vision, and as a contribution to a contemporary political debate, but they were not the central substance of his art. His public voice could, at times, overwhelm and unbalance introspective expression, but never for long.

While R. S. Thomas's linear prosody is not nearly as operationally effective in his public poetry as it is in his more pensive, emotionally-reflective verse, it is perhaps the *ideal* prosody for a poetry that considers thinking and feeling as *acts*, as *processes*. For these reasons, Thomas's adoption of linear techniques well prepared him to write poetry of both inward and outward spiritual exploration. As we have discussed, spiritual concerns, though they would have always been a part of Thomas's vocational life, became more personally acute at Eglwys-fach, largely due to interactions with parishioners he did not respect, who "aggravated the conflict between the withdrawn solitary poet, the parish priest, and the ardent Welsh nationalist".¹⁷⁷ These spiritual concerns, and the inevitable

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Timothy Wilson, *Guardian* 15 Sep. 1972, 8. In fact, Wilson reports that Thomas left Eglwys-fach over a dispute with a retired general concerning Churchill's death. "At a church meeting a

questions they raised, become paramount after Thomas becomes vicar of Eglwys Hywyn Sant, Aberdaron, in 1972. At Aberdaron, where the Llŷn peninsula reaches out between sky and sea, R. S. Thomas develops the style he defined at Eglwys-fach. In fact, it is at Aberdaron that Thomas is at his most progressive and *avant-garde* as a modern poetic stylist.

general referred to the fact that Churchill was dying and suggested they should pray for the old man and have a memorial service. 'Surely you've seen it in the papers' the general said to Thomas. 'I don't read newspapers,' Thomas said. Turning to the others the general snorted, "need I say more?" (9). This event was perhaps not, in and of itself, causal of Thomas's departure since Churchill died in 1965 and Thomas did not leave Eglwys-fach until 1967, but perhaps it pushed Thomas toward that decision; in any case, the incident is symptomatic of his relations with his parishioners at Eglwys-fach.

Chapter 4: A Style Developed (1972-1988)

John Barnie: *About the time you published H'm (1972), you experimented much more with stepped, indented lines, and broke syntax more radically across the line. You consolidated this in Laboratories of the Spirit (1975) by dropping the conventional capital letter at the beginning of the line. It seems a major development related to distinct changes in subject matter. The new style is very unlike most contemporary English or Anglo-Welsh poetry—but there are analogies, at least, with the work of American poets like William Carlos Williams. Could you comment on what led you toward these changes?*

R. S. Thomas: I left Eglwys-fach with its hinterland of Welsh hill country in 1967. I had many uncollected poems at the time and these were published as *Not That He Brought Flowers* in 1968. Looking back both geographically and chronologically from the peninsula, where I then was, I felt I had more or less exhausted that theme. The change in style came with a certain change of perspective. [. . .] You are correct in thinking that William Carlos Williams was influential in my change of form in certain poems, as being apter for new subject matter and new thinking.¹

The above question and response are part of a 1990 interview, first published in *Planet*, in which Ned Thomas and John Barnie “probe” R. S. Thomas, querying him about a wide range of topics, including his childhood, his vocation, his faith, his feelings about Wales and the Welsh language, his poetic themes, and his influences. While Thomas’s views on many of these subjects can be found elsewhere, “Probings” is the only interview in which Thomas is asked about a *stylistic* response to American free verse, Barnie (correctly) intimating that Thomas may have gleaned certain elements of his later style from American poets.² As Barnie observes, these elements are “very unlike most

¹ “Probings”, *Miraculous Simplicity* 43-4.

² Most critics and reviewers have entirely neglected this American influence. In his entry for *The Continuum Encyclopaedia of British Literature*, for instance, Justin Wintle writes, “Jettisoning the established props of fixed meter and rhyme, T. instead relies on alliteration, assonance, and patterned phrasing. While therefore his verse may look free, in reality, steeped in both English and Welsh prosodic traditions, it is anything but” (eds. Steven S. Serafin and Valerie Grosvenor Myer [New York and London: Continuum, 2003] 982). Wintle is simply inaccurate. Initially, as we have discussed, Thomas’s prosody *was* “steeped” in the English tradition (though somewhat artificially) since he was in no position to be a part of any other tradition. And at Manafon, his poetry did undergo a process of “Cymrification” that was heavy in “alliteration, assonance, and patterned phrasing”. But once he had made the transition to free verse—and *pace* Wintle’s comments, it most definitely *is* free verse—his poetry was no longer “steeped” in either tradition. He “jettison[ed]” many elements of both “prosodic traditions” and, helped by his reading of American poetry, began to experiment, to grope, to feel his way along new stylistic paths.

contemporary English or Anglo-Welsh poetry”,³ and we have already concluded that Thomas’s response to American free verse is significant. However, this response can only account for part of his later stylistic development. Geography and landscape, spiritual and intellectual searching, and continued introspection also play prominent roles. Indeed, in his response to Barnie, even as he acknowledges William Carlos Williams as an influence (and it is a measured acknowledgment: “in certain poems”), Thomas frames his stylistic development within a wider context. Specifically, he points to three interrelated factors that influenced his style in the 1970s: a “change in perspective”, “new thinking”, and “new subject matter”.

In very few places does R. S. Thomas discuss, or even refer to, his later style, so his response to a question about lineation and spatiality should not be taken lightly; in fact, his response offers us a useful overview of this stylistic period. His “change in perspective” leads to intensified spiritual concerns and what becomes the central

³ The key word here is “most”. By 1972, similar stylistic properties *could* be found in British poetry, and not just in the work of R. S. Thomas. We have already discussed *Critical Quarterly*, which helped to establish a transatlantic poetic dialogue, giving many British poets exposure to “American” forms. Experimentation ensued. Thom Gunn, a Movement poet whose later style changed significantly under the influence of American free verse, writes,

During the 1960s the English discovered 20th century American poetry. But the whole lot at once—from Williams to Duncan and Snyder—has proved a bit indigestible. People seem to be imitating it in England, but they are not yet really using it. (*Tracks* 8 [1970]: 9, quoted in Neil Powell, *Carpenters of Light: Some Contemporary English Poets* [Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1979] 119).

Another group that experimented with “American” forms, the Underground poets of the 1960s, took their stylistic cues not from William Carlos Williams or the Black Mountain school, but from the American Beat writers. The Underground poets, Michael Horovitz, Pete Brown, and Adrian Mitchell being perhaps the most notable, favoured open forms, and their subject matter was mainly anti-war, anti-establishment verse, often meant more for public readings and demonstrations than the printed page. Horovitz’s popular anthology *Children of Albion* (1969), which was dedicated to Allen Ginsberg, consolidated the Underground’s accomplishments. But it was perhaps Al Alvarez, a close friend of Sylvia Plath, who made the biggest impact when he edited *The New Poetry: An Anthology* (1962), which included work by John Berryman and Robert Lowell (R. S. Thomas appeared in the 1966 revision). In his controversial essay, “The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle”, Alvarez was highly critical of contemporary English poetry while praising American poetry, and this caused quite a stir among literary critics. R. S. Thomas, then, did not single-handedly introduce “American” prosodies into Britain (although he was one of the earliest poets to do so and perhaps the first, returning to Gunn’s term, “to really use [them]”). However, having already been accepted to a degree by some Movement poet-critics, Thomas *was* perhaps best-situated to be taken seriously by the English establishment when incorporating into his verse what were largely viewed as irregular, outlandish, and even non-poetic forms. (Gunn, who had relocated to America and was teaching in California, was no longer in such a position.) That Thomas’s later poetry was *not* considered fairly by many critics, and that it was dismissed by many of the *same* critics who had been his earlier champions, is evidence of a largely Anglo-centric, anti-experimental aesthetic in British criticism, one that had become entrenched by the 1960s.

ambition of his poetry: an exhaustive search for God. His “new thinking” delves into New Theology, philosophy and, most significantly from a stylistic viewpoint, an idiosyncratic blend of conceptual physics, chemistry, and biology that he refers to as “pure science”. These offer the poet new metaphors for his spiritual searching. His “new subject matter” reflects this “new thinking”, and it also reveals a growing determination to contemporize his poetry. Fearing that poetry is becoming “outmoded”, “a dying art”,⁴ Thomas attempts to make spiritually-minded poems relevant within, and relevant *to*, a science-minded, post-industrial world.

The stylistic corollaries of this new perspective, thinking, and subject matter are the focus of the present chapter, and we will discover that at Aberdaron, R. S. Thomas develops the style he defined at Eglwys-fach. As he continues to write poems which are *acts* of thinking and searching, he expands and intensifies the functionality of his linear prosody, which becomes more systematic in its use of enjambment. We will also discover that poems of spiritual discord, both as introspective struggles and as expressions of “the decay of traditional beliefs in God, soul, and the afterlife”,⁵ become iconic verse structures, reflecting the unstable frequencies of modern worship. These iconic poems are examples of “structural mimesis”,⁶ an important concept to the poems written at Aberdaron. However, before examining the effects of these developments on specific poems, we will make some broader distinctions about the free verse line; in doing so, we will refute a common fallacy that Thomas’s critics have often used as a basis for their negative critiques.

⁴ Thomas asks these questions in his interview with Barker: “Is poetry a dying art? Is it being outmoded?” *Probing the God-Space* 330.

⁵ R. S. Thomas, “Probing” 40: “With science and technology so enormously influential, spawning as they do new words every day, and with the decay of traditional beliefs in God, soul, and the afterlife, surely what England should be waiting for is a poet who can deploy the new vocabulary and open up new avenues, or should I say airways for the spirit in the twenty-first century”.

⁶ Both Plato and Aristotle define mimesis as “a reflection of nature”. In poetics, the term is generally used to describe rhythms and sounds that act out, or “mime”, subject matter. In the case of R. S. Thomas, however, lines and stanzas are also “structurally mimetic”: on one hand, his use of enjambment mimics the shifting structures of thought processes; on the other, his verbal structures reflect a destabilized spiritual condition and an *un*structured, fragmented world, the parts of which do not constitute an ordered whole.

Line Integrity: A Fallacy

I see some people are still nit-picking about my so-called lack of form. *I wish they'd catch up.* John Wain, one of the Movement bunch, seems to have begun it, and Donald Davie, another Movement fan, agrees, carrying on about enjambement, etc, as if that mattered any more.⁷

The above excerpt is taken from a 1993 letter, sent from R. S. Thomas to Raymond Garlick, in which the poet expresses frustration with what he sees as an antiquated aesthetic. More immediately, he seems to be reacting to Donald Davie, who had recently described Thomas's lineation as "a tic, a mannerism", asserting that "Thomas [was] handling [the English verse-line] with a peculiar gracelessness",⁸ and that "the offensiveness" was "in the enjambements, the run-overs".⁹ There is, of course, nothing wrong with pointing out perceived weakness in a poet's work. This thesis has certainly done so. But, when critical arguments appear unbalanced or perpetuate misreadings, they should be contested. Thus, in discussing the concept of "line integrity", and by labelling it a fallacy, one is not taking aim at Thomas's critics as much as attempting to address the flawed premise upon which many of their arguments are based. One *does* hope, however, that future critics and reviewers will be less likely to fall back on conventional platitudes when discussing R. S. Thomas's work, less dismissive of a prosody they do not immediately understand, and more apt to consider the operations of his style with equity.

The fallacy of line integrity asserts that each line of a poem should have established boundaries, and that these should seldom be violated. When line endings coincide with ends of grammatical phrases, or when they are marked by rhyme or end-punctuation, they exhibit "integrity". It is, in fact, to integrity that Davie appeals when attacking Thomas's prosody: "such abrupt or violent enjambments are a valuable

⁷ Quoted in Rogers, *The Man Who Went Into the West* 253, italics added.

⁸ R. S. Thomas's "Poetry of the Church of Wales", *Miraculous Simplicity* 138. Davie's essay was collected in 1993, the same year Thomas wrote to Garlick. However, it is possible that Thomas read the essay much earlier; it originally appeared in *Religion & Literature* 19.2 (Summer 1987): 35-47.

⁹ Ibid. 129.

resource available to the poet; but when they are resorted to so frequently [. . .] the trick seems to be mere mannerism, one that denies minimal integrity to the verse line".¹⁰

Similarly, Holder maintains that "you can't get much impact from transgressing a nonexistent boundary".¹¹ However, this fallacy ignores a very obvious fact: the end of a printed line *is* an existent boundary; indeed, it is the very boundary that allows enjambment to function at all in free verse. Generally speaking, line endings in non-metrical verse cannot be heard when a poem is read aloud; they work visually.¹² In the case of R. S. Thomas, who "compose[d] on the page" and "believe[d] that the inner ear which goes into operation as the eye runs along a line of poetry is more delicate and subtle than the outer ear" ("The Making of a Poem" *SP* 86), the poems are primarily meant to be read on the page.¹³

Another problem with the term "integrity" is that it is unspecific and is often used nebulously. Michelle Boisseau's argument is a good example:

As the basic unit of metrical verse is the foot, one might say that the basic unit of free verse is the line, more precisely the interrelationship between lines and sentences. Within the poem each line must have its own integrity: its length, rhythm and ending must be justified by what they contribute to the poem's meaning.¹⁴

Boisseau errs in comparing the metrical foot, a fixed unit of prosody, to the free verse line, which is fluid and not strictly measurable. And if by "*interrelationship* between lines and sentences" Boisseau means that the free verse line is inseparable from the sentence, then she is arguing for syntax verse which, while a perfectly legitimate prosody, is clearly

¹⁰ "R. S. Thomas's Poetry of the Church of Wales" 129.

¹¹ *Rethinking Meter* 149.

¹² It is for this reason that in his otherwise insightful piece on R. S. Thomas, R. G. Thomas errs when he, on one hand, describes "sentences [. . .] broken up by taut, jerky phrases, frequent questions, and vitriolic phrases" but then, on the other, contends that "illustrations would be tedious, [. . .] especially in print, because R. S. Thomas is essentially a poet to be read aloud" ("Humanus Sum: a Second Look at R. S. Thomas", *Critical Writings on R. S. Thomas* 47). Certainly the poems *do* frequently gain something from being read aloud, but print illustrations of his technique are crucial, not tedious.

¹³ In an interview with Gwyneth Lewis and Peter Robinson, Thomas says, "When I write, I'm listening with an inner ear to the way it sounds. I build the poem up like that. And if there's a word too many, it goes into the next line. But the thing is I never really meant for them to be read out loud". Quoted in Rogers, 254.

¹⁴ Michelle Boisseau, "Free Verse", *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art*, eds. Annie Finch and Kathrine Varnes (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002) 73.

not *always* the most desirable one. If, however, Boisseau is using “interrelationship” in the same way we used “interplay” in Chapter 3, then she is describing the technique of counterpoint, which is no more a measurable “unit” than the line itself. Counterpoint, while crucial to R. S. Thomas’s free verse, will not serve as “the basic unit of free verse” any more than syntax verse, or anaphoric free verse, or syllabic verse, or any other prosody that goes under the broader heading of “free verse”. As we have discussed at length, free verse *has* no basic unit of prosody. One “can define it only in negatives”.¹⁵ Boisseau’s argument for linear integrity is therefore unclear because her concept of the line is itself imprecise.

The concept of “line integrity” is therefore a fallacy because it either leads to critical ambiguity or, as in the case of Davie, implies that poems cannot succeed when their lines lack boundaries (that is, boundaries other than printed line endings). While this is not the place to discuss the history of English prosody, it is worth mentioning that over time, the line has undergone a gradual process of destabilization. We no longer require a determinate number of feet, syllables, or stresses in a given line. We do not ask poets to capitalize the first word of every line, or to mark line endings sonically with rhyme, as Dr. Johnson required when he called for “every verse unmingled with another as a distant system of sounds” (for “unmingled with another”, read “possessing line integrity”). It is telling, in fact, that in this same passage Dr. Johnson also calls blank verse “verse only to the eye”.¹⁶ Dr. Johnson’s label lives on, but it is now applied to free verse. Critics feel safe in dismissing systematically-enjambed free verse because they believe such poetry requires nothing of the poet but a word processor. But systematically-enjambed free verse does *not* disqualify writing from being poetry any more than rhymed and metered lines qualify it as such (as almost any greeting card will

¹⁵ T. S. Eliot, “Reflections on *Vers Libre*” *Selected Prose* 90.

¹⁶ “Milton”, *Lives of the English Poets*, quoted in John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford UP, 1975) 91.

testify). Indeed, in many of R. S. Thomas's later poems, a continual *lack* of integrity is crucial to the way lines operate upon the reader. And prosody *should* be operative, not merely decorative. In fact, for all our just criticism of Davie, we can agree with his argument that "it is English verse that [Thomas does] violence to, not English poetry" if we interpret "English verse" in the way Davie does, meaning verse where lines have mandatory boundaries.¹⁷ Indeed, in poems which act as the mimetic for "metallic warfare",¹⁸ or for "the soul" as it "refrigerat[es] / under [a] nuclear winter",¹⁹ doing violence to the verse is quite the point.²⁰

A Change in Perspective

R. S. Thomas finally left (escaped) the "cramped womb" of Eglwys-fach in 1967, and he took up the living at Eglwys Hywyn Sant, Aberdaron that same year. Located at the end of the Llŷn peninsula, the village of Aberdaron is one of the extremities of Wales. "The next move could only be into the Irish Channel", writes the poet's wife, M. E. Eldridge.²¹ The church itself, below a steeply-sloping graveyard, nearly rests on the beach, and sea sounds reverberate within its walls. Outside, high headlands push out on both sides of

¹⁷ "R. S. Thomas's Poetry of the Church of Wales" 136. One can't help but note that Davie's reasoning is often at odds with itself. For example, he writes, "For grace or gracefulness, though we are right to look for it in poetry and to feel resentment when it is denied us, is not traditionally held to be a *sine qua non* of poetry" (138). One's obvious rejoinder is: if "grace" (a term Davie does not define) is not essential to poetry, then why are we right to feel resentment when it is absent? Part of Davie's implied answer lies in his use of the word "traditionally", which reveals his obvious preference for received form. Each time Davie uses a term like "respectable prosody" (130), or "traditional decorum" (133), he is merely making an *argumentum ad antiquitatem* for which he offers no other justification. We find another disconnect in Davie's response to the poem "Cain" (*H'm* 15), where he writes, "I can accept that the poem has to be graceless if it is to be (as it surely is) sublime and tragic and austere" (139). Thomas's poems are certainly (and intentionally) "tragic and austere". But, after a barrage of comments which, by his own admission, are meant to be damaging, Davie's reluctant acceptance of one particular poem reads like further denigration.

¹⁸ From "The Casualty" (*LS* 21).

¹⁹ From "Formula" (*EA* 1).

²⁰ There is, in fact, a non-Englishness in Thomas's prosody that Davie picks up on, but he is not, as Davie suggests, rebelling against English prosody per se. Traditional English metres and stanzaic forms were simply inappropriate to his experience, his subject matter, and the world his poems reflect. Marjorie Perloff has written, "alternate modes of writing poetry—'free verse,' the prose poem, or, more recently, visual poetry and sound-text—were created by artists who felt the traditional accentual-syllabic meters were alien to their experience, *that experience was itself fluid, shifting, nondefinable*" ("The Linear Fallacy", *The Georgia Review* 35 [Winter, 1981]: 868, italics added).

²¹ From *Memoirs*, quoted in Rogers, 225.

the bay, and all that is visible is a vastness of sea and sky. Across the strait is Bardsey Island, bird sanctuary and site of both ancient and modern pilgrimage. In these surroundings, Thomas “became conscious of the sea all around [him], geological time, the pre-Cambrian rocks”.²² From this outpost, where the land touches immensities of space, Manafon faded into the distant past and, since “there was [certainly] no sustenance for his muse in looking back on Eglwys-fach” (A 76), the poet’s imaginative vision widened. From this “peninsula / of the spirit” (“Emerging” F 41), Thomas re-engaged questions of identity:

One headland looks at another headland. What one sees must depend on where one stands, when one stands. There was sun where he stood. But on the pre-Cambrian rocks there was also his shadow, the locker without a key, where all men’s questions are stored. (ERS 70)

Thomas left Eglwys-fach feeling as though he had “exhausted” themes relating to the identity of Wales, but his grasp of his *own* identity remained tenuous as ever. Who was this person, this shadow on the ancient rocks?²³ What was his place in time and in the universe? What was his—and, by extension, “all men’s”—relationship to the eternal? Depending on where, and when, the poet stands, the answers fluctuate and can be at variance with each other. Because Thomas is “without a key”, his questions require “endless attempts and experiments”.²⁴ His “attempts” lead him to explore an array of opposites: sun and shadow, faith and doubt, absence and presence, language and silence. His “experiments” draw upon language and metaphor from history, mythology, mysticism, religion, and cosmology. Any of these, alone or in combination, may rise to the surface of R. S. Thomas’s poetic vision.

²² “The Poetry and Life of R. S. Thomas”, *The South Bank Show*, prod. Melvyn Bragg, ITV, 17 February 1991. Quoted in Brown, *R. S. Thomas* 78.

²³ Thomas uses similar imagery in a prose passage from *The Echoes Return Slow*: “There is a rock on the headland [. . .] immemorially old [. . .]. The mind spun, vertigo not at the cliff’s edge, but from the abyss of time. In the strong sun [. . .] sometimes his shadow seemed more substantial than himself” (86).

²⁴ In a 1972 letter to Christine Evans, Thomas writes, “As a teacher you are short of the time necessary to make endless attempts and experiments” (quoted in Rogers, 242).

R. S. Thomas's expanded perception, and his broadening search for answers, results in an intensification of several thematic and stylistic elements which are evident in the poems written at Eglwys-fach. According to Thomas, "the change [in publisher, from Rupert Hart-Davis to Macmillan] was a convenient posting-house as it followed on a somewhat new departure in my poetry consequent upon my move to Aberdaron".²⁵ One notes that Thomas's description is not of a jarring or revolutionary change in his work; "somewhat new departure" is measured, certainly nothing to resemble the "radical" and "dramatic" alterations that many critics see in Thomas's poetry of the 1970s.²⁶ But there is certainly a wider vision, and an increased depth of thinking, particularly with respect to the poet's prevailing spiritual concerns.

One recalls that at Eglwys-fach, Thomas struggled with what Hooker calls "the experience of relationships", and that he found the duties of a parish priest difficult to perform amongst a people he did not respect. In increasingly introspective poetry, he examined his relationship to his environment, his parishioners, and his country. At Aberdaron, however, Thomas becomes chiefly concerned with a less tangible, but ultimately more important, relationship: his relationship to "ultimate reality"; that is, to God.²⁷ The perpetually displaced R. S. Thomas, having "crawled out at last / as far as

²⁵"Probings" 27.

²⁶J. D. Vicary, for example, uses the term "radical break" to describe these changes ("*Via Negativa*: Absence and Presence in the Recent Poetry of R. S. Thomas", *Miraculous Simplicity* 89). Julian Gitzen argues that *H'm* signals "a major change of theme" and that Thomas "suddenly shifted the bulk of his effort" to a pursuit of God ("R. S. Thomas and the Vanishing God of Form and Number", *Miraculous Simplicity* 170-1). Patrick Deane ascribes "radical changes" to *Not That He Brought Flowers*, then asserts that Thomas "made an even more dramatic departure with the publication of *H'm*" ("The Unmanageable Bone: Language in R. S. Thomas's Poetry", *Miraculous Simplicity* 200). These critics are responding to a very real development in the poetry, but as we have chronicled through our close reading, that development is not "radical", "sudden", or "dramatic".

²⁷R. S. Thomas first uses the term "ultimate reality" in the introduction to his *Penguin Book of Religious Verse* (1963): "Roughly defining religion as embracing the experience of ultimate reality, and poetry as the imaginative representation of such, I have considered five aspects of that experience: the consciousness of God, of the self, of negation, of the impersonal or un-namable, and of completion" (9). It is possible that Thomas borrowed the term from Bishop John Robinson, who uses it in his popular book *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963): "God is, by definition, ultimate reality. And one cannot argue whether ultimate reality *exists*. One can only ask what ultimate reality is like [. . .]. Thus, the fundamental theological question consists not in establishing the 'existence' of God as a separate entity but in pressing through in ultimate concern to what Tillich calls 'the ground of our being'" (29). Thomas (who was also familiar with Tillich's ideas) mentions his reading of Robinson, albeit somewhat indifferently, in a letter to Simon Barker,

[he] dare on to a bough / of country that is suspended / between sky and sea",²⁸ permanently unites his introspective search for identity and "home" with a far-reaching, exhaustive search for his God. These searches, now one search, constitute R. S.

Thomas's "next, and last, necessary obsession".²⁹

So many critics have written about the spiritual and religious themes in Thomas's poetry that any summary would be inadequate. In addition to many thoughtful articles, several book-length studies have been written by critics and theologians alike.³⁰ What has scarcely been addressed, however, is the fundamental relationship between Thomas's spirituality and his poetic style. M. Wynn Thomas asserts that "Thomas's theology may be inscribed in every aspect and at every level of his writing—from lexicon and syntax to formal patterning", and he adds this vital enjoinder: "*we need constantly to be aware of the theology of his style*".³¹ Unfortunately, this needed awareness has, until now, been all but nonexistent outside of M. Wynn Thomas's own critical writings. When the poet's style has occasionally been remarked upon, it has not been considered as a reflection of the spiritual concerns that pervade his later poetry. The present chapter seeks in part to open this necessary discussion, initiating a dialogue whose absence is so apparent it is like a presence.

Whereas the Judeo-Christian God is usually portrayed as a God of order and wholeness and totality, the God of R. S. Thomas is most often depicted as a God of disintegration and fragmentation. In the biblical Genesis, God creates the earth in a set

remarking, "I don't remember being very impressed by Robinson's book" (*Probing the God-Space* 294), but he also writes, this time in *Neb*: "Our image of God must be transformed, as Bishop Robinson has said" (*A* 107). As we will see, the term "ultimate reality" is also used by Fritjof Capra in *The Tao of Physics* (1975), an important influence on Thomas.

²⁸ From "Retirement" (*EA* 38).

²⁹ M. Wynn Thomas, "R. S. Thomas and modern Welsh Poetry", *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (New York: Cambridge UP, 2007) 167-68.

³⁰ See, for example, D. Z. Phillips's *R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God* (London: Macmillan, 1986), Elaine Shepherd's *R. S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence: Images of God Explored* (London: Macmillan, 1996), William J. McGill's *Poet's Meeting: George Herbert, R. S. Thomas, and the Argument with God* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2003), and William V. Davis's *R. S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology* (Waco, Texas: Baylor UP, 2007).

³¹ "Irony in the Soul: The Religious Poetry of R. S[ocrates] Thomas" 52, italics added.

order, and it is a world *of* order, of even days and nights and seasons, where every living thing multiplies “after his kind”.³² But Thomas’s God has apparently created a world of *disorder*. It is the world described in the book of Job: “a land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, *without any order*, and where the light is as darkness”.³³

As D. Z. Phillips observes,

When [R. S. Thomas] looks at the facts that confront him, they are not facts which seem to get their sense from an integrated whole. [. . .] Indeed, it may be assumed that there is no large sense to be found; there is simply the sense of this, that and the other thing.³⁴

R. S. Thomas’s later style reflects this sense of disintegration. In the last chapter we determined that the reader of an R. S. Thomas poem frequently experiences shifting meaning and must adjust “each moment of the going”.³⁵ Such shifts and adjustments, recurrent in the poems written at Eglwys-fach, occur even more frequently in the poems written at Aberdaron. Lines are shorter, more frequently broken across syntax, and less autonomous; they typically do not begin with capital letters and are seldom end-stopped. In the previous chapter we examined how Thomas groups words and images together on a given line so that their meanings resonate and shape the reader’s experience. In contrast, the lines of the poems written at Aberdaron are more fragmented. While a given poetic line inevitably contains elements of language—a noun, an adjective, a verb, or some combination of these—Thomas’s lineation consistently severs these from each other. As a result, his poetic *structures* appear to contain “this, that, and the other thing” and do not “get their sense from an integrated whole”.³⁶

If, as Stephen Cushman argues, “the prosodic structure of a poem tells a story about wholeness and fragmentation, a story about the world in which the poem says

³² See KJV Gen. 1.

³³ KJV Job 10:22, italics added. Lines from “He” (*H’m* 21) allude to the story of Job: “He holds out his two / Hands, calloused with the long failure / Of prayer: Take my life, he says / To the bleak sea, but the sea rejects him / Like wrack. He dungs the earth with / His children and the earth yields him / Its stone”.

³⁴ *Poet of the Hidden God* 42.

³⁵ Olson, “Projective Verse” *Strong Words* 95.

³⁶ Phillips, *Poet of the Hidden God* 42.

what it says",³⁷ then the structure of R. S. Thomas's later work tells the story of a fragmented world.³⁸ The effect of such poetry on the reader is described by Derek Attridge:

Instead of the verse line expanding to accommodate utterances too large and momentous for the metrical frame, *it splinters into fragments to achieve a minute focus on the details* that might be lost in a metrical progression. The run-on is, of course, crucial in this kind of verse [. . .].³⁹

Instead of "expanding [the verse line] to accommodate utterances" (as does Whitman, for example, and Blake in his Prophetic Books), R. S. Thomas "splinters" lines "into fragments"; as a result, the reader is encouraged to focus on isolated details rather than on those combinations of details that are necessary for sentence logic. In this way, the structures are iconic, representational. They are mimetic forms of a consciousness that perceives the world as incoherent. "Making" (*H'm* 17), here quoted in full, is a good illustration of such a structure:

And having built it
I set about furnishing it
To my taste: first moss, then grass
Annually renewed, and animals
To divert me: faces stared in
From the wild. I thought up the flowers
Then birds. I found the bacteria
Sheltering in primordial
Darkness and called them forth
To the light. Quickly the earth
Teemed. Yet still an absence
Disturbed me. I slept and dreamed
Of a likeness, fashioning it,
When I woke, to a slow
Music; in love with it
For itself, giving it freedom
To love me; risking the disappointment.

The speaker of "Making" is describing acts of creation but is not making clear connections between what is created. Instead of an ordered, biblical creation where

³⁷ William Carlos Williams and the Meaning of Measure 41.

³⁸ This fragmentation also links Thomas to the Modernist world, a land where things have fallen apart, where the centre has not held, (See Yeats's "The Second Coming": "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" [lines 3-4]).

³⁹ Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm* 170, italics added.

things are evaluated in turn and judged to be good, we find an almost random creation: “first moss, then grass” [. . .] “I thought up the flowers / Then birds” [. . .] animals / To divert me”.⁴⁰ Indeed, God, the likely speaker in this poem, is often portrayed by Thomas as an indiscriminate experimentalist possessing a lack of forethought, one who is scarcely in control of His own work. At times He views His creations as mistakes and, at others, does not understand, or even recognize them. In “Echoes” (*H’m* 4), for example, God stares at the earth:

What is this? said God. The obstinacy
Of its refusal to answer
Enraged him.

And in “Soliloquy” (*H’m* 30), God says, “I have blundered / Before; the glaciers erased / My error”.⁴¹ In “Making” we find no apparent order, no significant connections between creations, and the poem’s sentences reflect this. Ironically, it is Thomas’s use of systematic enjambment that makes God’s creative acts seem system-less. Nouns, for example, are prominently featured, but they rarely appear together on the same line: “it”, “it”, “moss”, “grass”, “animals”, “faces”, “wild”, “flowers”, “birds”, “bacteria”, “darkness”, “light”, “earth”, “absence”, “likeness”, “it”, “music”, “it”, “freedom”, “disappointment”. Lineation separates these from each other, so we focus on each without immediately associating it with the others. Each is as important as the next, and just as easily forgotten in the absence of sentence logic. The recurrence of “it” is itself interesting. “It” is the most indistinct of personal pronouns, used for inanimate objects, abstractions, even people at times. Normally it must refer to a preceding noun, of course. But here, in the opening line of “Making”, there is no antecedent for “it”, so the reader is immediately disconnected. And the second “it” can only refer back to the first.

Moreover, not only do we not know what “it” is, but we also do not initially know who

⁴⁰ In “Dialogue” (*LS* 18), this casualness is expressed through clever punning as God says, “You were my waste / of breath, the *casualty* / of my imagination” (italics added).

⁴¹ See also “Repeat” (*H’m* 26); “Other” (*H’m* 36); “The Hand” (*LS* 2); “God’s Story” (*LS* 7); “The Tool” (*LS* 11); “The Gap” (*F* 7); and “The Woman” (*F* 14).

the speaker is. Certainly there is nothing in the title, or the first few lines, to suggest God as the speaker. In a similar way, "It" is used to represent the earth in the first lines of "Soliloquy": "And God thought: Pray away, / Creatures; I'm going to destroy / It". Through lineation, the speaker is separated from the addressed "creatures" (indeed, "creatures" itself shows a lack of intimacy and familiarity), and the verb "destroy" is cut off from the direct object, "It". Thus, God distances Himself from the earth, its inhabitants, and his own destructive actions.

In "Making", lineation also separates subjects from predicates in the lines "Quickly the earth / Teemed. Yet still an absence / Disturbed me". Also, the reasons for God's actions are at times buried in prepositional phrases that seem like afterthoughts and are cut off from what precedes them: "Furnishing it / To my taste"; "animals / To divert me" (about one-fourth of the poem's lines begin with the preposition "to"). As in the opening of "Soliloquy", the actions of "Making", as well as the reasons for those actions, are somewhat disconnected from the speaker. The impression is once again of a whimsical God who acts first, thinks second, and whose creations do not amount to wholeness. This impression is strengthened by the fact that *none* of the poem's lines is autonomous. Each is fragmentary. To function grammatically, each depends upon a previous line or a subsequent line, and most depend on both previous *and* subsequent lines. The poem's first sentence spans six lines, as does its last. We have previously seen Thomas use lineation to create shifting, multiple meanings that place the reader in a state of continual readjustment, but we have not encountered poems where each line, each part of speech even, initially resists integration. "Making" (a somewhat ironic title, given the randomness of creation) is such a poem, a mimetic representation of an uncertain, disconnected Creator, a disorganized creative process, and the disintegrated fragments that result from that process. Its structure is not merely a visual illustration of the poem's

thematic content, but also a *demonstration* of that content, and this kind of structural mimesis is part of “the theology of [Thomas’s] style”.

Of course the irony is that “Making” is not disorganized at all. It is *quasi*-disorganized, arranged to *seem* disarranged. This is something that critics, when they do mention Thomas’s style, often miss. For example, in his analysis of Thomas’s painting poems, James A. Davies accurately observes “quickenings lines [that] try to detach themselves from the sentences that contain them”, and he points out how “Any lingering sense of formal order is further undermined by the sound of most endings, by fading cadences, uncertain emphases that deny climax and firm shaping”. But as shrewd as his observations are, Davies sees these properties as “examples of [Thomas’s] impulse towards formlessness”, a distracting “anarchy” that the poet admirably overcomes in later work.⁴² But Thomas’s poems are never “formless”; indeed, it is the very “form” of “Making” that allows it to succeed.⁴³ To borrow (and use in a new context) a term from theologian Paul Tillich, the poem is “a structure of destruction”.⁴⁴

Paul Fussell, arguably the most respected American prosodist, addresses this issue of linear arrangement: “When it solicits our attention as poetry, a group of lines arranged at apparent haphazard is as boring as *tum-ti-tum*”, and he adds, “The principle is

⁴² “Pessimism and Its Counters: *Between Here and Now and After*”, *Miraculous Simplicity* 231-32; 242.

⁴³ In the painting poems specifically, Thomas uses form to involve the reader in the process of interpreting art, a process that is well-suited to the stepped free verse Davies labels as “anarchic”. As Helen Vendler writes, “Thomas’s enigmatic and epigrammatic reflections mimic [. . .] the instant responses of the mind [. . .] and are pointedly designed to draw the reader into an identity with the writer” (“R. S. Thomas and Painting”, *The Page’s Drift* 59). One might wish to replace “writer” with “speaker” (many of the poems are in fact written in third person, intentionally preserving a distance between speaker and subject), but Vendler’s point is well-made.

⁴⁴ *Systematic Theology Vol. II* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1957) 60. It is worth noting that the three volumes of *Systematic Theology* were among the books in Thomas’s personal library when he died. Although it was obviously not meant as such, Tillich’s term can usefully serve as a theory of poetics. He argues that “destruction has no independent standing [and] it is dependent on the structure of that in and upon which it acts destructively”. As with many other R. S. Thomas poems, “Making” seems disintegrated in part because we are comparing it to poems of longer, more autonomous lines, and to the rhythm of non-lined prose sentences. In fact, one of the most rewarding functions of Thomas’s free verse is that, by destabilizing the reading experience, it frequently exposes the nuances of language that unbroken prose often glosses over. This may be what M. Wynn Thomas has in mind when he writes that “R. S. Thomas is particularly good at taking advantage of the ironic fact that modern poetry, when it doesn’t rhyme or conform to metre, actively encourages us in our modern habit of reading for mere sense; that is, reducing everything to glib prose” (“Irony in the Soul” 66).

that every technical gesture in a poem must justify itself in meaning".⁴⁵ We can agree with Fussell's second claim, that "every technical gesture in a poem must justify itself in meaning", with the caveat that a "technical gesture" is itself part of a poem's meaning and is not subservient or secondary to theme and subject matter. But it is Fussell's first claim that is particularly relevant to our discussion of R. S. Thomas's free verse. Fussell asserts that "a group of lines arranged at *apparent* haphazard" is "boring" and ineffective. Whether or not we can agree with Fussell depends entirely on our interpretation of "apparent". If we take "apparent" to mean "obvious" or "evident", then we can certainly agree. Poetry, or *any* art for that matter, is not achieved through haphazard or slapdash technique. However, if we interpret "apparent" in its other sense, meaning "seeming" or "ostensible" or "*quasi*", then we must assert that a group of lines which is *quasi*-haphazard can, as we have just observed in "Making", "justify itself in meaning" very well indeed.

One also wishes to emphasize that disorientation is usually our initial reaction only, not our final impression. The poems do ultimately cohere, at least provisionally, at the end. Again, this sense of disconnectedness, transferred to the reader, is often a mimetic for the poet's own internal response to the world as he feels his way toward a kind of provisional statement, or interim awareness. As the above-mentioned "endless attempts and experiments" are made, "the mind" finds itself "recuperating endlessly / *in intermissions*",⁴⁶ "growing old in / *the interval* between here and now".⁴⁷ "Making" approaches this kind of intermission, cohering to a degree in its final lines. As God sleeps and "dream[s] / Of a likeness", He pauses, no longer randomly creating. Then, for the first time in the poem, there is forethought and clear intent as He creates "to a *slow* / Music". But even as the poem expresses this momentary steadying, its form remains

⁴⁵ *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* 88.

⁴⁶ "Aleph" (BHN 93, italics added).

⁴⁷ "Pluperfect" (BHN 89, italics added).

unstable, and uncertainty remains, the poem ending with God “risking [. . .] disappointment” by creating mankind. In other words, the poem’s final statement, its achieved awareness, is that instability cannot fully be alleviated.

“Making” is one of several poems in *H’m* that re-envision creation. These are often variations on the biblical Genesis, the Garden of Eden, and Adam and Eve. These poems, too, reflect a disruption of order. “Female” (*H’m* 27), for example, begins, “It was the other way round: / God waved his slow wand / And the creature became a woman”. These opening lines are a reordering (“the other way round”) of Judeo-Christian creation, and other lines in the poem dislocate Genesis imagery even as they rely on it. When the poet writes, “her forked laughter / played on him”, the reader is meant to associate “the woman” with the mythical serpent, and this gives the poem a misogynistic tone. The poem also plays on the idea of original sin as, instead of indulging in a forbidden sexual encounter, Adam is rebuffed by Eve: “The man turned to her, / Crazy with the crushed smell / Of her hair; and her eyes warned him / To keep off”. At times, the poems in *H’m* depart even further from scripture, visioning their own creation (and destruction) mythology. We saw this in “Soliloquy”, and “Once” (*H’m* 1) reads like a re-creation following a nuclear holocaust. Brown observes how the poem echoes *The Waste Land*,⁴⁸ and it is no wonder when one considers that it is Eliot who first captured the fragmented world we have been discussing.

Mythological poems appear throughout Thomas’s later work, but they are most pronounced in *H’m*, as many critics have indicated. Elaine Shepherd, for instance, states that “The mythic poems emerge as a specific group within the Thomas *oeuvre* in *H’m* (1972)”.⁴⁹ Christopher Morgan asserts that “Of the thirty-seven poems which make up the collection *H’m*, fully eleven can be labelled ‘mythic’”.⁵⁰ Morgan is particularly good

⁴⁸ R. S. Thomas 74.

⁴⁹ *Conceding an Absence* 90.

⁵⁰ R. S. Thomas: *Identity, Environment, and Deity* 158.

when it comes to analysis of these poems, arguing that while they seem to be authoritative, written “in clipped, bold declaratives”, they are essentially “theological probings”.⁵¹ They are ways for Thomas to re-envision creation through the broken lens of modernity. These poems owe their prosody primarily to the worldview we have been discussing, but the *vision* of the poems was in part influenced by Ted Hughes. It was Jeremy Hooker, in his 1972 review of *H'm*, who first put forth the idea that “this aspect of the book, whereby a sustained use of metaphor raises it to the level of myth, bears a remarkable affinity to another recent collection of myth-making poems, Ted Hughes’s *Crow*”.⁵² Most recently, Tony Brown has written, “In some ways [. . .] Thomas’s technique in these sardonic, black-humoured, cartoon-like poems echoes the mythic-cartoon poems which [. . .] Ted Hughes was publishing in this period”.⁵³

Crow did stimulate a creative response in R. S. Thomas, who admits to Lethbridge that Hughes “set me off on a new line”.⁵⁴ Much like *The Great Hunger* had been in the 1940s, *Crow* became an enabling text for R. S. Thomas. What *Crow* and *H'm* have in common is not a shared, general technique, but a shared method, which is that the poems of each volume “translate individual suffering into a universal experience through myth”.⁵⁵ *Crow* arises at a time of great tragedy for Hughes. Sylvia Plath committed suicide in 1963, and Hughes’s partner, Assia Wevill, did the same in 1969, also killing their two year-old daughter, Shura; *Crow* is dedicated to Assia and Shura. It is, understandably, terribly bleak at times:

⁵¹ Ibid. 155.

⁵² Hooker, review of *H'm* 90.

⁵³ R. S. Thomas 74.

⁵⁴ While initially denying the influence of *Crow* when Lethbridge suggests it, Thomas then lets down his defensiveness and concedes, “I would certainly say that Ted Hughes set me off on a new line. He must have come more or less about the time when I was finishing up with this Hill Country, you know, and this sort of thing. And coming out here, and seeing the pre-cambrian rocks, I was very conscious I was having an . . . if you look at the sea, it’s such a beautiful surface, like a mirror [. . .]; well underneath this is chaos, things gobbling each other up. Well, I didn’t need Hughes to tell me that, but probably seeing him approach it in that way, that set me off on my poem. I would certainly be honest enough to say that that was quite possible” (“R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge” 54).

⁵⁵ Rand Brandes, “Ted Hughes: *Crow*”, *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Neil Roberts (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) 514.

Who owns these scrawny little feet? *Death.*
 Who owns this bristly scorched-looking face? *Death.*
 Who owns these still-working lungs? *Death.*
 Who owns this utility coat of muscles? *Death.*
 Who owns these unspeakable guts? *Death.*
 Who owns these questionable brains? *Death.*
 All this messy blood? *Death.*
 ("Examination at the Womb-door")⁵⁶

We see a similar tonal register, a similar questioning, in "Cain" (*H'm* 15):

The blood cried
 On the ground; God listened to it.
 He questioned Cain. But Cain answered:
 Who made the blood?

We can see that the incompetent God in Hughes surely appealed to Thomas at this point in his development; additionally, the indestructible "machine" in Thomas's work may echo the indestructible Crow. The poems seem to inhabit similar worlds. But, one is quick to add, there is little in *H'm* from a *stylistic* point of view that bears resemblance to Hughes's collection. In the above excerpts, the difference in lineation is obvious. Much of *Crow* is written in straightforward syntax verse with frequently end-stopped lines—

Hearing shingle explode, seeing it skip,
 Crow sucked his tongue.
 Seeing sea-grey mash a mountain of itself
 Crow tightened his goose-pimples.⁵⁷

—and Hughes almost always chooses to extend his lines to accommodate longer phrases, rather than breaking those phrases across lines:

So in one hand he caught a girl's laugh—all there was of it,
 In the other a seven-year honeymoon—all that he remembered—
 The spark that crashed through coked up his gonads.
 So in one hand he held a sham-dead spider,
 With the other hand he reached for the bible—
 The spark that thunderbolted blanched his every whisker.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (London: Faber, 1999 paperback edition) 5.

⁵⁷ "Crow on the Beach" (Ibid. 34).

⁵⁸ "Crow Improvises" (Ibid. 58).

There are, in fact, considerable differences between the two volumes. For example, the poems of *H'm* are not sequential and are often incongruous with each other while *Crow* reads like a series of poems, each poem part of a larger, epic narrative. And the poets do not use myth in precisely the same way. One senses that Hughes uses myth as a way to deal with suffering, creating enough distance from his own tragedy to make writing the poem possible. By way of contrast, the poems of *H'm* are much closer to the poet's spiritual suffering, and the variations in Thomas's thoughts and feelings, most crucially his fluctuating faith, are reflected in the movement of his lines. These differences are also reflected in point of view/narration: *Crow* is primarily written in third person, whereas much of *H'm* is written in first person.

We can observe the similarities and differences between the volumes by looking at the title poem from *H'm*, which seems to be influenced by *Crow* in terms of content, but is stylistically quite dissimilar:

and one said
 speak to us of love
 and the preacher opened
 his mouth and the word God
 fell out so they tried
 again speak to us
 of God then but the preacher
 was silent reaching
 his arms out but the little
 children the ones with
 big bellies and bow
 legs that were like
 a razor shell
 were too weak to come.

(33)

The poem shares imagery and even phraseology with "Crow's First Lesson" (11):

God tried to teach Crow how to talk.
 'Love,' said God. 'Say, Love.'
 [. . .]

'A final try,' said God. 'Now, LOVE.'
 Crow convulsed, gaped, retched and
 Man's bodiless prodigious head

Bulbed out onto the earth, with swivelling eyes,
Jabbering protest—

We see that both poems contain a command to speak of love, both poems contain images of misshapen bodies, and both use plosive 'b' sounds to describe those bodies. Thomas writes of children with "*big bellies and bow / legs*", and Hughes writes of "Man's *bodiless prodigious head / Bulbed*". But Thomas uses no punctuation at all, and the only word that warrants a capital letter is "God". His poem mirrors the action it expresses: "and the preacher opened / his mouth and the word God / *fell out*". The reader "falls" as he or she reads, rapidly, in search of completion. In contrast, Hughes uses a great deal of punctuation, which slows the reading, and he capitalizes consecutive words, presumably to place more emphasis on God's commands: "*Say, Love. [. .] Now, LOVE*". Interestingly, there is more compassion in the Thomas poem, which is also, clearly, more directly concerned with issues of Christian faith and pastoral effectiveness. In essence, "Crow's First Lesson" contains what Thomas responded to in *Crow*: mythical content, register, and occasional imagery. But ultimately the underlying prosodies in *H'm* and *Crow* are quite dissimilar.

Having just read "*H'm*", we should note that in addition to segmenting poems, drawing the reader's attention to seemingly disconnected parts of speech, systematic enjambment can also create a continuous sense of expectation. It often "gives a breathless quality to the flow of information that increases the degree of our anticipation".⁵⁹ We might say that *H'm* is in *flux*, in both senses of that word. On one hand, the poem constantly shifts and readjusts, miming instability; on the other, it is constantly in motion, flowing from left to right, top to bottom (in this case, that flow is enhanced by the absence of punctuation). Both kinds of "flux" are important to the poems written at Aberdaron, and what is fascinating is that they rarely impede each

⁵⁹ Stephen Dobyns, *Best Words, Best Order: Essays on Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 110.

other; a poem can be quasi-disorganized *and* in fluid motion. For example, as one proceeds through the seemingly-disassociated lines of "Making", one is not disoriented to the point where he or she is tempted to slow down or return to the beginning of a given line; in fact, just the opposite occurs: one is compelled to read faster. This may be what Attridge has in mind when he argues that a run-on both violates *and heightens* the reader's sense of the continuity of the sentence.⁶⁰ On one hand, the reader pays less attention to syntactic units and more attention to individual words and images; on the other, he or she is impelled to push forward, in search of the "sense" each line lacks. This is true, and perhaps *especially* true, in those poems which are quasi-disorganized, where lines are not autonomous.

R. S. Thomas's readers would have become accustomed to pointed cuts and surprising enjambments in the poems of the 1950s and 60s. Not only were they taught, by the poems themselves, to take in surprising line-groupings, multiple meanings, and interplays between lineation and syntax, but they also came to *expect* these stylistic elements. Therefore, Thomas's use of enjambment, even as it became more pronounced in the poems written at Aberdaron, would no longer have been surprising in and of itself.⁶¹ His readers learned to read through line breaks with increased momentum and anticipation. Indeed, as sites of linear interplay, the enjambments had become potentially *more* communicative, not less, due to this increased reader awareness and attention.

According to prosodist John Hollander,

⁶⁰ Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm* 170.

⁶¹ Those critics who flatly rejected Thomas poems of the 1970s are, of course, an exception to this statement. As we have discussed, these critics sought to manage R. S. Thomas and categorize him. They simply could not accept something different than their expectations. Jeremy Hooker, a critic who was shrewd enough to see the merits of *H'm* at the time of its publication, writes the following in his review of that volume: "Undoubtedly, of all the books so far this one offers the least excuse *for encapsulating his work* in the image still common in England and Wales, of the bleak nature poet taking his stand on the primal sanities of rural Wales. [. . .] At any rate, this new book is likely to disappoint some expectations. [. . .] *But the capacity of a poet to disappoint expectations can also be a measure of continuing growth.* Prytherch supplied one dramatic metaphor for the radical questioning that other metaphors, now raised to the level of myth, continue—and continue with an overall strength and intensity, and a corresponding tautening of language, that the earlier books cannot match" (*Poetry Wales* 7.4, 93, italics added).

When enjambment is systematic [. . .] a wide range of effects ensures that even strong, pointed cuts at line breaks will never startle by their mere occurrence but, if at all, for what they reveal—about language, about the world, or because of when and where, in the course of the poem, they show it.⁶²

Enjambment that is frequent is not necessarily routine. There can still be great variation, “a wide range of effects”. R. S. Thomas is very effective, in fact, at deciding where to break a line for maximum rhetorical effect, at determining what part of speech will appear at the end of one line, at the beginning of the next. Will the line be broken after the subject, verb, or direct object? Will the new line begin with an adjective, preposition, or noun? Where will the sentence itself end? How far will it push into the next line? Will it end immediately after the line break, creating a jarring stop near the beginning of the next line? Will it end mid-line, thereby creating a caesura? Or will the sentence conclude near the end of the line, flirt with equilibrium by being nearly, but not quite, in sync with the poem’s lineation? As he answers these questions, Thomas adjusts cadence and rhythm, creates stops and starts of various kinds. Line breaks become anticipatory pauses that he uses to control reader attention. This is perhaps most critical in poems of spiritual searching, where these stops and starts are mimetic representations of spiritual anxieties, waiting, reaching, sudden silence, fits and starts. These techniques *do* reveal a great deal “about language, about the world” as they compose “the theology of Thomas’s style”.

Eddie Wainwright describes how, during a rare workshop with R. S. Thomas, he took the opportunity to ask the poet how he knew when to break a line since “it is certainly a factor influencing how you read the poems”. The way Wainwright describes Thomas’s response is perhaps predictable—“In response, he just gave me his notable basilisk glare and continued doing what he had been doing”—but Wainwright’s subsequent impressions resonate nicely with our present discussion:

⁶² Hollander, *Vision and Resonance* 110.

I surmised that the question was meaningless as far as he was prepared to be concerned; but I also had the sudden notion, which I have seen no need to abjure, that the form of many of his poems was a felt one, worked out (or happening) as he went along, that his lines are thought-structured and move on when a phase of the thought moves on, or break off at a point where the beginning of the next line might occasion a slight surprise, or emphasis, lending that characteristic air of spontaneity or improvisation. In other words his lineation is an, as it were, silent rhetorical device.⁶³

Wainwright is particularly shrewd in pairing the *private* (“a felt one”; “worked out [. . .] as he went along”; “thought-structured”) with the *public* (“influencing how you read”; “occasion a slight surprise”; “air of spontaneity”; “rhetorical device”). Thomas’s prosody is simultaneously personal and communicative, especially in poems of spiritual searching. In other words, “the theology of his style” works mimetically, drawing the reader into the process of spiritual questioning because the poem itself is a reflection, an iconic representation, of the poet’s own quest.

One way to demonstrate how the movement of R. S. Thomas’s lines both reveals and represents his spiritual concerns is to first view a *de*-stylized version of one of his well-known poems and observe what is *not* happening. If we take “Emerging” (*LS* 1) and rewrite it in syntax verse, thereby nullifying the effects of counterpoint, the poem begins thus:

Not as in the old days I pray, God.
 My life is not what it was.
 Yours, too, accepts the presence of the machine?
 Once I would have asked healing.
 I go now to be doctored,
 to drink sinlessly of the blood of my brother,
 to lend my flesh as manuscript
 of the great poem of the scalpel.
 I would have knelt long,
 wrestling with you, wearing you down.
 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.

⁶³ *Poetry in Our Time: The Poet, Publisher, Reader and Reviewer* (Belfast: Lapwing, 2008) 86.

This version of “Emerging” offers the same words as the original, in the same order, but it hardly resembles the poem as Thomas wrote it. Linear effects have been negated. What was once, at turns, hesitant and insistent, persistent and submissive, is now flat, nearly vapid. A flexible prosody, which could adjust to emotional currents, has become somewhat predictable. In this version, one is more prone to read for “prose meaning” than for an experience with poetic language. Anticipation, which in Thomas’s poetry is a kind of *participation*, is mollified in a poem that no longer feels its way along or makes adjustments. Said in another way, the poem still deals with spiritual themes, but the *stylistic* theology is absent. Thankfully, Thomas writes a very different poem, one that—and this is the truest measure of a poem’s prosody—could not have been a more successful poem in any other form:

Not as in the old days I pray,
 God. My life is not what it was.
 Yours, too, accepts the presence of
 the machine? Once I would have asked
 healing. I go now to be doctored,
 to drink sinlessly of the blood
 of my brother, to lend my flesh
 as manuscript of the great poem
 of the scalpel. I would have knelt
 long, wrestling with you, wearing
 you down. 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.

As opposed to our re-lineated version of “Emerging”, the actual poem is enjambed from the onset. The opening line break sets a tone—again, a *stylistic* tone—for what follows; the surprise, and subsequent adjustment, created by the linear turn is essential to how the poem is read. The turn is not a harsh run-over that breaks syntax; in fact, the line does not run-over at all. It ends with a comma and appears to stand alone. It is only as we get to the *contre-rejet* that we discover the first sentence is briefly extended. It is here that the poem’s prosody begins to work on us. In this moment, the poem becomes a prayer. The

reader, who has not been prepared for the dramatic situation of a prayer by either the poem's title or its first line, must immediately adjust, and the full stop after "God" gives him or her a moment in which to do so. "God"—as a name, as a word housed in a structure of words, as subject matter, and as the poem's newly-discovered (from the reader's perspective) narratee—is framed on both sides by moments of silence. The first moment is created by the comma and line break, the second by the full stop. This might be seen as another example of structural mimesis—God being framed by, and emerging from, moments of silence—but it is also an instance where R. S. Thomas, as he so often does, is teaching the reader *how* the poem is to be read. When the reader stops after "God", the previous pause, at the end of the first line, is altered. *Retroactively*, it becomes a preparatory pause, a moment of reverence before the name of deity is spoken.⁶⁴ In the moment that the pause at the beginning of line two asks the reader to reassess and reclassify the pause at the end of line one, the poem's prosody is established.⁶⁵

One also notes that the surprise in line two is possible only because line one does *not* sound like a prayer. It could be spoken to anyone. This is a new, more colloquial kind of prayer ("Not as in the old days I pray"); it is clearly not a rote prayer taken from a prayer book, nor is it a prayer like those of the ancients, the biblical supplicants, the saints and pilgrims. Rather than liturgical, or communal, prayer becomes personal,

⁶⁴ Thomas uses this same technique in another of his well-known "prayer" poems, "Waiting" (F 32): "Face to face? Ah, no / God; such language falsifies / the relation". These two line breaks do several things. As in "Emerging", the first break asks the reader to reconsider the poem as a possible prayer. However, that break also places individual emphasis on "no", a terminal word, and "God", an initial one. The reader is thus given an alternate meaning simultaneously, the hint that there may be "no God" listening to this prayer at all. Thomas uses similar ambiguity in "After the Lecture" (NBF 22), when he writes, "God is not there / to go to", momentarily suggesting that God is simply "not there". This spiritual ambiguity is a key component of "the theology of [Thomas's] style". When the speaker of "Waiting" says, "such language falsifies / the relation", we understand that, on one hand, the biblical language used by Jacob in Gen. 32:30, "I have seen God face to face", paints a false picture of the way the speaker relates to God. But, on the other hand, before making the linear turn, we know only that "such language falsifies", as the line break itself falsifies, or at least clouds, the meaning of the words. Alternatively, it may be prayer itself, or a poem-prayer, that is a false linguistic act, an exercising of "the duplicity / of language, that could name / what [is] not there" ("Code" BHN 98). Once again, here meanings are revealed entirely through prosody.

⁶⁵ John Pikelis's assertion that "Thomas's poetry was a poetry of beginnings *constantly revised*" is quite useful as a description of his linear prosody and, in particular, what that prosody asks of the reader ("The Curious Stars": R. S. Thomas and the Scientific Revolution", *Echoes to the Amen* 86, italics added).

authentic, and urgent. Indeed, the speaker is also saying that he doesn't pray as he himself once did, in *his* "old days". He has changed, and we learn this immediately after we learn that the poem is a prayer: "My life is not what it was". This is the poem's only end-stopped line, and this matter-of-fact declaration gains gravity because it is not broken across lines. In a systematically enjambed poem, it is non-enjambed lines which stand out, receiving more attention. With these first two lines, the speaker is emphasizing that this altered prayer is "emerging" as part of an altered spiritual life, and that the poem will both tell us and *show* us the nature of that change; indeed, it is an analysis of the poem's prosody that best reveals that change.

The word "too" in line three, while seemingly minor, sets up one of the most important line breaks of the poem. "Too" is both a realisation and a confession, uniting speaker and addressee. On one hand, the speaker is realising that God has accepted a presence; on the other, he is confessing that he, the speaker, has accepted that same presence. However, the reader's understanding of this "presence" can only materialize, and then be adjusted, in conjunction with the line break, where the sentence is suspended and the preposition "of" hangs, floating in white space: "the presence of"...what? The language is familiar, common to scripture and prayer: the presence of the Lord, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the presence of angels.⁶⁶ Thomas is trusting that the reader will bring these familiar "presences" into the anticipatory pause created by the line break. Indeed, it is this anticipation, this moment of waiting, wherein the reader considers various possibilities for completing the prepositional phrase, that makes the revelation in line four so stark when it does arrive: "the presence of / *the machine*". Because the poet has brought other possible, more traditional religious "presences" to the reader's mind, the reader is now aware of their respective absences. "The presence of / the machine" is

⁶⁶ The word "presence" is, of course, always pregnant in Thomas's poems, which consider absences, presences, and absences that are, at times, like presences.

therefore not only striking for what it is, but for what it is not, for what it has *displaced*.⁶⁷ This abruptness tempers the stated acceptance in the previous line. In fact, any acceptance of the machine, and its abrupt entrance into “Emerging”, is just as abruptly, and quite literally, brought into question; that is, the reader discovers that he or she has actually been *reading* a question. As a result, the reader himself/herself must now *ask* questions: Does God accept the machine’s presence and, by prosodic implication, its noise, its intrusiveness? And if this speaker “now” accepts the machine’s presence (the “now” leads us to believe there was a “then”, “the old days”, a time when he did not accept it, or it simply did not exist), what is the nature of this newfound acceptance?

When considering these questions, one needs to be aware that in Thomas’s work, the Machine does not merely denote machinery. Rather, it represents rote, (often dangerously) non-judicious thinking. It is also “Thomas’s shorthand for the mechanical, unimaginative/stereotypical thinking of globalized consumerism, in which the individual becomes merely a unit of production and consumption”.⁶⁸ One wishes to emphasize that R. S. Thomas continues to condemn such thinking. Nowhere in “Emerging” is the machine *itself* embraced. Only its presence, its existence, is accepted, and even then it is immediately questioned. As we will see, Thomas’s decision to infuse his poetry with the language and metaphors of science is never akin to accepting the destructive process, or destructive *products*, of mechanical thinking. When it enters the poetry, the machine, and what we might call “machine language”, is tempered with self-scrutiny and doubt, and the poet employs such language to censure, not accept, the machine-builders, the practitioners of destructive science. Indeed, Thomas distinguishes the technological machinations of applied science from the imaginative processes of “pure science”, which he embraces. As he tells John Barnie, “it is not pure science and religion that are

⁶⁷ This technique is also used in “Soliloquy” (*H’m* 30), where the machine enters the verbal structure abruptly and displaces expectations associated with traditional worship: “Within the churches / You built me you genuflected / To the machine”.

⁶⁸ Brown, *R. S. Thomas* 75-6.

irreconcilable, but a profit-making attitude to technology", and he adds, "If pure science is an approach to ultimate reality, it can differ from religion only in some of its methods".⁶⁹ By the 1970s, in fact, the poet's thinking has changed so that science, rather than being antagonistic to spiritual thought, actually offers Thomas his preferred metaphors for spiritual searching. Thomas more clearly defines "pure science" in a 1981 Radio address:

Pure science in its contemplation of the structures of the universe, and the mystery of space and time, *all of these things are religiously orientated*, it seems to me. It is only the machine and the use to which it is being put and technology, and some of the uses to which it's being put that seem to stand between man and God.⁷⁰

Therefore, while he remains, "generally speaking, anti-technology",⁷¹ R. S. Thomas is not, *pace* Grahame Davies's arguments, unequivocally "anti-modern".⁷² The "syndromes" we discussed in the previous chapter *do* lead Thomas away from what he sees as the *fruits* of modernity: industry, materialism, overcrowding, violence, waste. But the poetry itself is a glaring exception to any retreat from modernity. The poems *engage* the modern world. They are written with contemporary prosodies, imagery, and metaphors which *reflect* that world. Pure science is "religiously orientated" because it seeks answers. The Machine merely seeks profit, and it encourages mechanical thinking as opposed to the spiritual and intellectual exploration Thomas embraces.

Therefore, when the machine enters "Emerging", breaking into the silence generated by a line break, it formally mirrors what it does thematically, tearing into silences, disrupting peaceful landscapes. This is an example of mimesis, and the poem is also mimetic in other ways. The technique we have been discussing—arranging an

⁶⁹ "Probings" 37.

⁷⁰ "Furrows into Silence", BBC Radio 4, 31 July 1981, italics added.

⁷¹ "Probings" 37.

⁷² "Resident Aliens: R. S. Thomas and the Anti-modern Movement" 50-77. Davies's study, which places Thomas among other visionaries like Simone Weil, is in fact quite important. One simply wishes to qualify his use of the terms "modern" and "modernism". Davies is equating modernism with destructive technology and industry, both of which threaten a spiritual existence that is tied to the natural world. In this sense he is quite right.

anticipatory moment at the end of the line, into which the reader inserts possible completions, then following that brief pause with a *contre-rejet* that either surprises the reader or asks the reader to reinterpret the previous line (or both)—is a demonstration of spiritual searching. The reader, “like Michelangelo’s / Adam” reaches out “into unknown [white] space” (Threshold” BHN 110), and the expectation of what will appear after the line break creates momentum, a desire for completion, so that reading itself becomes an act of faith, one that is sometimes rewarded, sometimes thwarted. In either case, the reader must continually evaluate and reassess the search *as* he or she is searching. This also happens at the end of line four of “Emerging”. When we read, “Once I would have asked”, our instinct is to complete the phrase with what one usually asks for in prayers: forgiveness, strength, wisdom, health, prosperity, favour, direction. These may, in fact, be the very things the speaker asked for “in the old days”. The word “healing” at the beginning of line five is not the verbal shock that “the machine” was in line four (prayers for healing are common), yet it, too, forces an adjustment, partly because it begins a new line, partly because it turns the reader toward an inevitable question: why is the speaker *not* asking for healing now?

The answer comes soon enough. The speaker is not asking for anything at all. Indeed, there is no request made anywhere in “Emerging”. This speaker, we are led to believe, once asked God for things, perhaps for things he did not receive, perhaps even for many of those things the reader inserts into the pause between lines four and five. Indeed, that pause becomes more meaningful when we realize that all the possible things the speaker might once have asked for are removed from this new form of prayer. What remains is *not* what the reader inserts into the white space following the line, but the line itself, just as it is written: “Once I would have asked”. The speaker is not asking anymore. He is abandoning the notion that egocentric requests are the point of prayer. This

development is enhanced by how Thomas uses lineation to place pronouns at the beginning of lines, thereby giving them emphasis:

I would have knelt
long, wrestling with you, wearing
you down. 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.⁷³

Like the biblical Jacob, to whom Thomas often alludes, the speaker once wished to wrestle God into submission. The line break “wearing / *you* down” leads us to believe that the result of this prayer would be a change, a reversal, of what usually happens when the speaker prays (namely the *speaker* being worn down by long, unheard prayer). The same God who was forced to hear Jacob’s request would now hear the speaker’s persistent voice: “Hear my prayer, Lord, hear / *my* prayer”. When such requests have gone unanswered, they have been defeating, leading supplicants (including the speaker) to explain “[God’s] silence by / *their* unfitness”, as opposed to the unfitness of God or the unfitness of the mode of prayer. These emphasized pronouns and possessives create a contrast with the speaker’s new mode of prayer, where asking for one’s own needs, be it for healing or even recognition, is ultimately “not what prayer is about”. Without the line breaks positioned to immediately precede pronouns, these points of emphasis would simply not exist. Thus, using pointed line breaks to create emphasis, and to reveal the speaker’s evolved understanding of prayer, is another facet of R. S. Thomas’s stylistic theology.

These pronouns, by means of what they do *not* emphasize, lead us to an understanding of what prayer *is* about. Instead of a series of egotistical requests (“Hear my prayer, Lord”) this new mode of prayer seeks unity; the desire to be heard has been replaced by the desire for oneness, or rather the *consciousness* of oneness since desire fades

⁷³ Italics added.

to the background. The new prayer is reminiscent of Jesus's prayer in St. John 17:21: "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee", or, in the words of "Emerging", "the consciousness of myself in you, / of you in me". We also learn, from the diction of the poem itself, that the speaker will now seek this oneness with new, modern metaphor and an appropriately contemporary vocabulary. In fact, these new metaphors *allow* God to be recognized, and this, too, is emphasized by a line break preceding a pronoun: "I begin to recognize / *you* anew, God of form and number" (italics added). Similarly, when the speaker describes prayer as "the annihilation of difference", his choice of words goes beyond an allusion to the destructive world in which the prayer is offered and actually emphasizes oneness. In physics, "annihilation" is the phenomenon in which a particle and an antiparticle, such as an electron and a positron, collide and disappear, and in their place is a combined energy which is approximately equivalent to the sum of their masses.⁷⁴ In other words, their former identities have been annihilated, creating a new form of energy.⁷⁵ Similar metaphors, and instances of wordplay involving scientific diction, are ubiquitous in Thomas's later work. Indeed, "pure science" represents a mode of thought that influences tonal registers, word choices, the conjunction of lines, and verbal structures.

And yet the modernization of the poems does not change the fragmented world in which they are written, a world that favours the *other* sort of "annihilation". As Thomas writes in "The Absence" (F 48), "I modernise the anachronism // of my language, but he is no more here / than before". The oneness described in "Emerging" is rare, and it must be found *within* a broken world. In fact, the systematic enjambment and

⁷⁴ M Simhoney, *Invitation to the Natural Physics of Matter, Space, and Radiation* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 1994) 87: "When a free electron meets a free positron, the two nuclear particles may disappear in a point of space, out of which will then *emerge* [. . .] combined energy". Italics added.

⁷⁵ This metaphor becomes even more resonant when one recalls that Thomas's God is often described in terms of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle; that is, elusive, observable only when He has already moved on. One example is found in "Adjustments" (F 29): "There is an unseen / power, whose sphere is the cell / and the electron. We never catch / him at work, but can only say, / coming suddenly upon an amendment, / that here he has been". The idea of God as elusive is a near-constant in Thomas's later work. "His are the echoes / We follow, the footprints he has just / Left" ("Via Negativa" *H'm* 16).

non-autonomous lines of “Emerging” are a mimetic for this world, where neither “this, that, [nor] the other thing” contains God, and “things pass and / the Lord is in none of them” (“Threshold” *BHN* 110). Here, Thomas alludes to the biblical Elijah, who is a witness as “the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains and brake in pieces the rocks”. An earthquake follows, “but the LORD was not in the earthquake”. Then there is fire, “but the LORD was not in the fire”; and then, “after the fire a still small voice”. Elijah hears this voice, and God speaks to him.⁷⁶ Like Elijah, R. S. Thomas sees a world that is rent and broken. Like Elijah, he sees things pass by. But unlike Elijah, who eventually hears the voice of God, Thomas is as demolished as those biblical mountain rocks: “I have heard the still, small voice / and it was that of the bacteria / demolishing my cosmos”.

In “Emerging”, then, the machine’s presence is accepted, and the language of science employed, but the potential consequences of the scientific revolution remain frightening. The style of the poem, even more than its content, conveys this:

Circular as our way
is, it leads not back to that snake-haunted
garden, but onward to the tall city
of glass that is the laboratory of the spirit.

The break between “way” and “is” stresses the idea that our way continues to be circular. This becomes important because despite the declaration that we are not returning to a mythical “snake-haunted / garden”, we are circling back, indeed *have* circled back, to a haunted place. By separating “snake-haunted” from “garden”, Thomas allows the adjective to remain spatially independent from the noun. Of course “snake-haunted” *does* modify “garden”, but as we have been discussing, systematic enjambment draws our attention to individual words, divorced from sentence meaning. As a terminal word, “snake-haunted” receives additional emphasis, and it resonates with other terminal

⁷⁶ KJV 1 Kings 19:11-12.

words, including “way”, “city”, and “spirit”. In other words, the poem suggests that our “way” is leading us, *has* led us, to a haunted place. Rather than a garden, it is a “city” where “Whatever you imagine / has happened”, where “No words / are unspoken, no actions / undone”. (“Thus” *LS* 48). In this place, the snake that haunts us is ourselves, the actions of our unchecked minds.⁷⁷

And yet “Emerging”, despite its structural representation of a disordered world, and despite its suggestion of a haunted city, is ultimately a poem about growth, and it ends on an optimistic note. Science has the potential to destroy, but it also offers the poet *spiritual* potential. A new kind of spiritual search, one that relies on scientific metaphor and scientific thinking, can take place in a “city / of glass that is [also] the laboratory of the spirit”. It is the poet, “the supreme manipulator of metaphor”,⁷⁸ who can experiment in this spiritual laboratory. As we have mentioned, Thomas referred to the writing of poems as “endless attempts and experiments”, and Terry Whalen observes that “Each poem in *H’m* is an intensely exploratory attempt to relate Godhead to the urgency of contemporary reality”.⁷⁹ Paradoxically, it was in prehistoric Llŷn, where he was conscious of being in touch with the sea and stars and rocks so old that they were effectively timeless, that R. S. Thomas increasingly experimented with the language of the modern.

New Thinking and New Subject Matter

Therefore when I stand at night and look towards the stars [. . .], I am not a dreamer belonging to the old primitive lineage of Llŷn, but someone who, partaking of contemporary knowledge, can still wonder at that Being that keeps it all in balance. (*A* 145)

⁷⁷ The dark side of human imagination is also addressed in “Pre-Cambrian” (*F* 23), where Thomas writes that “Plato, Aristotle, / all those who furrowed the calmness / of their foreheads are responsible / for the bomb”.

⁷⁸ This phrase comes from Thomas’s introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse* (1963): “Now the power of the imagination is a unifying power, hence the force of metaphor; and the poet is the supreme manipulator of metaphor” (8).

⁷⁹ *Philip Larkin and English Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1986) 135.

As we have discussed at length in earlier chapters, R. S. Thomas began his career as “a dreamer”, one who longed for “the old primitive lineage” of Wales. This longing evolved into a vision of Wales that existed, indeed could only exist, in his imagination. When that dream was left unrealized by the realities of Manafon and Eglwys-fach, Thomas “internalize[d] the dream for [safe] keeping”.⁸⁰ At Aberdaron, the poems continue to probe interior space even as Thomas’s poetic vision expands to outer space, to *God-space*.⁸¹ Aided by his daily readings in philosophy, theology, and popular science, he intensifies his religious questioning, and his poetry becomes relentless as it seeks a way to approach God metaphorically. Metaphor had always been Thomas’s way of approaching deity, even in his role as priest,⁸² but now he adorns his thought with contemporary metaphor. Always a poet of the imagination, Thomas now embraces the creative processes of pure science.

The above image of Thomas “look[ing] towards the stars” is a revealing one, as is Thomas’s choice of adjectives. As he gazes up from ageless Llŷn, Thomas is no longer “a dreamer belonging to the *old* [. . .] lineage”, but a “partak[er] of *contemporary* knowledge” (*A* 145). We have discussed star imagery in Thomas’s early work, imagery inspired by Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*, the Georgians, and eventually W. B. Yeats. For the early R. S. Thomas, the “glitter of stars” symbolizes brightness and beauty and Celtic magic (“Hiraeth” *SF* 34). For the later R. S. Thomas, who “recognize[s] [. . .] anew” a “God of form and number”, the stars are part of the God-space, but they can now be approached, searched through the lenses of science. Having “re-interpreted / the stars’ signals” (“Scenes” *LS* 44), this one-time star-gazer turns “space” traveller, probing God-space

⁸⁰ M. Wynn Thomas, *Internal Difference* 120.

⁸¹ “The New Mariner” (*BHN* 99): “For me now / there is only the God-space / into which I send out / my probes”.

⁸² In his interview with John Ormond, Thomas says, “Christ was a poet, the New Testament is metaphor, the Resurrection is a metaphor; and I feel perfectly within my rights in approaching my whole vocation as priest and as preacher as one who is to present poetry” (“R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet” 53). In the same interview, and in several other places, Thomas also refers to the bread and wine as metaphors.

and self-space simultaneously, an “astronaut / on impossible journeys / to the far side of the self” (“The New Mariner” *BHN* 99).⁸³ Indeed, in his metaphoric space-travel, each probe sent *outward* has, as its other face, an equal and opposite inquiry, or *in-query*. In “Groping” (*F* 12), Thomas emphasizes this through lineation: “Moving *away* is only to the boundaries / *of the self*” and “The best journey to make / *is inward*” (italics added).

Thomas’s outward exploration is thus tied to an inward journey, and that inward journey also explores with metaphor, into the table of elements and their chemical reactions as well as the microscopic world. Indeed, the poems often suggest that God’s power and presence are housed at the cellular and atomic levels,⁸⁴ and this inward focus contributes to the stylistic development we have been discussing. As we saw in “Making”, systematic enjambment can break sentences into fragments, often resulting in an intense focus on individual words, rather than on their combinations. In this way, the prosody becomes a microscope of sorts, a lens that magnifies components (particles) of language, which are not always seen when one reads text at the macroscopic (prose) level:

Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows; a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.
(“The Coming” *H’m* 35)

Here visual elements—“water”, “scorched land”, “colour”, “light burned”, “crusted buildings”, “shadows”, “serpent”, “slime”—call much more attention to themselves than they would in syntax verse or prose. The same is true with adjectives that are separated from their nouns: “fierce”, “bright”, “radiant”. Each element is magnified by lineation.

⁸³ For an exhaustive treatment of Thomas’s star imagery and its development over time, see Pikoulis, “The Curious Stars”: R. S. Thomas and the Scientific Revolution” 76-111.

⁸⁴ See, for example, “Adjustments” (*F* 29): “There is an unseen / power, whose sphere is the cell / and the electron”.

Indeed, for a poet who is perpetually seeking, minutiae become at least as important as the expanse of outer space. Everything, indeed every component of a thing, deserves attention since “deep down is as distant / as far out” (“They” *WI* 28), and since there is “nothing / so small that [God’s] workmanship / is not revealed” (“Alive” *LS* 51).

Because Thomas experiments in a metaphorical laboratory, as opposed to a real one, his science is inextricable from (and limited to) his use of language (“we are the slaves of language”, he tells Molly Price-Owen).⁸⁵ Clearly his science would often be suspect if taken *as* science,⁸⁶ but as a way of thinking, as a way of searching with words, his science works extremely well. This indivisible union of science and language is addressed in “The Absence” (*F* 48):

Genes and molecules
have no more power to call
him up than the incense of the Hebrews

at their altars. My equations fail
as my words do.

By ending a line with “fail”, Thomas obviously gives prominence to the idea of failure, but he also breaks the line immediately before an important word, “as”. “My equations fail / *as my words do*” can be read in two ways, both accurate. On one hand, the poet’s equations fail *like*, or *in the same manner as*, his words fail. Both in prayer and in poems, Thomas’s words have failed to entice or compose God;⁸⁷ likewise, his adoption of scientific diction and metaphor has also failed to invoke Him. On the other hand, Thomas’s equations fail *concurrently* with his words, *even as* they fail. Words are needed for scientific expression, whether in prayer or in a poem, and for Thomas, prayer and poetry

⁸⁵ “R. S. Thomas in Conversation with Molly Price-Owen” 98.

⁸⁶ Thomas more or less concedes as much in the “Probings” interview, saying, “To an austere scientist much of my imagery may be reprehensible, but as far as I have understood astronomy, relativity theory, and nuclear physics, I have found images in poetry, which I hope are not too muddle-headed” (36).

⁸⁷ The idea of summoning and enticing God with prayer and worship is also expressed in “The Empty Church” (*F* 35): “They laid this stone trap / for him, enticing him with candles, / as though he would come like some huge moth / out of the darkness to beat there. / Ah, he had burned himself / before in the human flame / and escaped, leaving the reason / torn. He will not come any more // to our lure”.

are essentially similar.⁸⁸ Thus, any failure of science—of “genes and molecules”—is, for Thomas, also a linguistic failure and a spiritual one; his “altar” is ultimately the page, his offering words. Lineation, coupled with a stanza break, suggests a contrast between his offering and “the Hebrews // at *their* alters”: *their* altars, as opposed to *my* altars (*i.e.* “my words”), the poet seems to suggest.

The melding of science and poetry leads us to a related observation, namely that for R. S. Thomas, metaphor is itself an amalgamation. The religious world blends with the scientific to create innovative metaphors. It is not a matter of *either* religious searching *or* scientific enquiry. As Morgan writes, “Compartmentalisation of thought is, for Thomas, a distortion of our experience of *an interrelated reality*”, and “compartmentalisation may, ultimately, invalidate the struggle toward unity and wholeness”.⁸⁹ In our earlier discussion of “Emerging”, we saw that “the consciousness of myself in you, / of you in me”—in short, the very “unity” Morgan mentions—was tied to scientific metaphor, specifically to a view of deity as a “God of form and number”. It is combined metaphors, in fact, that most frequently create an “interrelated reality”, which becomes R. S. Thomas’s way of approaching *ultimate* reality. We see this blending of metaphor on display in “Hebrews 12²⁹” (EA 11):

If you had made it smaller
we would have fallen off; larger
and we would never have caught up
with our clocks. Just right
for us to know things are there
without seeing them? Forgive
us the contempt our lenses
breed in us. To be brought near
stars and microbes does us no good,
chrysalises all, that pupate
idle thoughts. We have stared and stared, and not stared
truth out, and your name has occurred

⁸⁸ Interview with Simon Barker, 5 Sep. 1984: “[Prayer] is a form of. . . to discover in what terms can I even address this being and in what terms can it or he come into contact with me. As I say, when the mind goes off on that train of thought it’s obviously so like the kind of poetry one is trying to write that *I don’t really know when I’m praying and when I’m writing poetry*” (*Probing the God-Space* 305, italics added).

⁸⁹ R. S. Thomas: *Identity, Environment, and Deity* 86, italics added.

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.

The poem's title prepares us for the subsequent melding of religious and scientific metaphor. Although the poem is certainly a meditation on Hebrews 12:29, "For our God is a consuming fire", Thomas has written the title in exponential form; thus, we associate the poet's thought processes with something akin to solving an equation.

"Hebrews 12²⁹" takes in several different sciences: astronomy (planetary motion, stars, lenses); physics (gravitation); and biology (microbes, lenses, metamorphosis). The speaker begins by viewing creation from the perspective of gravitation. A smaller planet's gravity, he reasons, would not hold us down. A larger earth, with greater gravity, would make motion difficult. The corresponding scripture might read, "In the beginning, God calculated planetary gravitation, and He created an earth of optimum size to support human life". This idea is reinforced by the phrase "Just right", which sits alone at the end of line four. However, "Just right" actually belongs to a new sentence, which turns out to be a question: "Just right / for us to know things are there / without seeing them?" The speaker is asking why a God who creates an optimal *physical* existence would create such a difficult *spiritual* reality. The phrase "to know things are there / without seeing them" is, on one level, a reference to all things microscopic, but it is also a biblical allusion. While the poem is a meditation on a verse from Hebrews 12, the previous chapter of Hebrews contains the biblical definition of faith: "Now faith is the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen".⁹⁰ These words, "substance" and "evidence", are scientific words, but St. Paul uses them to describe the invisible: faith, hope, things not seen. For

⁹⁰ KJV Heb. 11:1, italics added.

R. S. Thomas, however, unseen evidence is oxymoronic.⁹¹ There is great irony in the fact that the earth's size can be measured, its gravity calculated and explained, but belief in God cannot be worked out in a similar way.

Lineation reinforces this disparity between physical and spiritual evidence. When we read the phrase "to know things are there" at the end of line five, we are still in the "just right" mode of optimal creation, so we read the line confidently. But when we make the turn, the *contre-rejet* shakes our confidence. We are confronted not only with the unseen, but also with the idea that the unseen is *part* of God's creation. The speaker implies that our spiritual existence is a kind of God-induced existentialism, "just right" to provide a *lack* of evidence. This is the conclusion the speaker is drawing; indeed, he lacks "evidence" to conclude otherwise. It is, in fact, the unseen that ultimately breeds contempt in the lines "Forgive / us the contempt our lenses / breed in us". These "lenses" are, on one level, telescopic and microscopic instruments that allow us to see "stars and microbes". But these "lenses" are also our own eyes. When we cannot see "evidence" of God with our human lenses, what good are those other lenses? "To be brought near / stars and microbes does us no good". Again, lineation is important. "To be brought near" ends line eight, suggesting that we are perhaps near *God*, but the line break brings us close to stars, to microbes. In this way the poem is mimetic: it brings us near to God for a moment, then breaks away, placing us where He is not. Thomas uses a similar technique in "Pilgrimages" (F 51), momentarily teasing us with God's poetic presence before (line)-breaking us away: "He is such a fast / God, always before us and / leaving as we arrive".

As we have seen him do before, Thomas here uses line breaks to create surprise, destabilize the reading experience, and give emphasis to particular words and phrases.

⁹¹ In fact, poems themselves often become "evidence". God can metaphorically exist in a poem, becoming a "God of *form* and number". The poet often writes to break silence, create something tangible, and name the unnamable. For more on this, see the present author's "A God of Grass and Pen".

For example, when we read that we are “chrysalises all, that pupate”, we imagine butterflies within us, something beautiful growing, but the line break changes our reading as we learn that we “pupate / idle thoughts” and are incapable of finding truth, no matter how long we stare. In line eleven, we note that even in a systematically-enjambed poem, Thomas will extend a line when it suits his rhetorical purposes (further demonstrating that his lineation is not merely “a tic”): “We have stared, and stared, and not stared”. The length of the line, combined with the repetition of the word “stared” and two caesurae, slows the reader and mimics the length of the staring. But, this long line is also misleading. The last “stared”, despite the word “not” preceding it, reads like an intransitive verb, “to stare”, because of its earlier counterparts; however, it is a transitive, phrasal verb, “to stare out”. As we realize this after the line break, our surprise gives “truth”, the very thing we have *not* stared out, greater impact. Truth not stared out is another example of the unseen, and is therefore related to the unseen God, indeed to all things “just right / for us to know [they] are there / without seeing them”.

Thomas also uses lineation to strike fear in the reader, and to emphasize that God *is* fear. In the phrase, “Who was it said: Fear”, the fear is almost like a shout. It is preceded by a colon, and it is capitalized, and it ends the line so that its echo fills the white space. The “not” comes like an afterthought, after the fear has been emphasized. Rather than faith being the substance of the unseen God, “*fear* is an ingredient / of our knowledge of [God]”. Significantly, Hebrews 12:28 ends with an exhortation to serve God “with reverence and Godly fear”. *Then* we read, in verse 29, “For our God is a consuming fire”. The “for” that begins verse 29 can therefore be read as “because”. We should serve God “with reverence and Godly fear [*because*] God is a consuming fire”. The fear/fire juxtaposition is in the Bible as well as the poem. But once again, because the poem’s metaphor is also scientific, the process of “looking deep into the fire” cannot be separated from processes of thermodynamics, heat transfer, radiation, combustion,

friction, etc. The word “property”—used in chemistry, mathematics, and physics—plays off these associations, but “property” makes God’s “kiss” seem material, something that has properties, when in fact our error, our “mistake”, is making God material at all.

Again, Thomas can suggest these things because the poem melds metaphor; indeed, the very act of “looking deep”, where we “stare and stare” is an imaginative process that is part of both spiritual *and* scientific thought.⁹²

One other biblical verse is part of the “substance” of “Hebrews 12²⁹”, and it is one to which Thomas frequently alludes:

And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, *and the bush was not consumed*. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and *see* this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.

(Exodus 3:2-3, italics added)

The fact that the bush is *not* consumed leads Moses to “turn aside”, to “see”, and this becomes an important metaphor in Thomas’s work. Life

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.
(“The Bright Field” LS 60).

These lines express faith, not fear. The speaker can see the “brightness” of eternity. And yet, in “Hebrews 12²⁹”, the act of “looking deep into the fire” and “expecting love / from a kiss” is a “mistake”. It is “the mistake / *we* make”. Again, lineation places emphasis on the pronoun, implying that God has also made mistakes (*c.f.* our earlier discussion of “Making”) but also asserting the error in anthropomorphizing “a presence / that is not human”. In a 21 March 1983 letter to Barker, Thomas refers to the “bourgeois cosiness” of those who “pray as though God is listening at the key hole”,

⁹² Thomas does not always “meld” metaphor so completely. At times he prefers to juxtapose traditional worship with scientific enquiry, questioning the potential of each as a means of approaching God. In “They” (WI 28), he writes of “the new explorers” who “discover [what] / we can’t see”, and he ends by asking, “Have I been too long on my knees // worrying over the obscurity / of a message? These have their way, too, / other than prayer of breaking that abstruse code”.

referring to them as “the ‘our heavenly father’ gang”. In a slightly earlier letter (9 January 1983), he writes, “Perhaps I could say it is people like Whitehead and Tillich that appeal more, because of their attempt to *distance* the deity”.⁹³ The point is that for Thomas, increasingly in this period, God is not *a* being, but being itself, or “the Ground of Being”, an idea he gleaned from Tillich.⁹⁴ One cannot, he realizes, expect love from such a source. Indeed, “expecting love” ends the penultimate line, so the poem momentarily suggests that expecting love *at all* is a mistake.⁹⁵ Again, this discourages faith. Unlike “the lit bush” which is not consumed, God’s “only property is *to* consume”.

One might guess “The Bright Field” to be a later poem than “Hebrews 12²⁹”. If so, it would demonstrate a growth in faith. But in fact it was written approximately eleven years earlier. This reinforces what we have already decided, namely that R. S. Thomas’s “endless attempts and experiments”—with language, with metaphor, with “new thinking” and “new subject matter”—are *individual* experiments, not final demonstrations or proofs, not meant to be reconciled. For Thomas, “any poem paradoxically devoted to defining the infinite was necessarily provisional and self-cancelling”,⁹⁶ and in a fragmented world, each poem is *itself* a fragment of meaning, one of many “experiments”. Søren Kierkegaard, who was a major influence on Thomas’s “new thinking”, writes that “it is contrary to the spirit of our Society to produce closely coherent works or greater wholes”, and that we “recognize the fragmentary as a characteristic of all human striving in its truth”.⁹⁷ Robert Minhinnick writes that Thomas’s poems “seem cuttings from an invisible main work, sketches for a masterpiece

⁹³ *Probing the God-Space* 293.

⁹⁴ “R. S. Thomas at Seventy”, cited in van Buuren, *Waiting* 178: “I do like Tillich’s idea of the Ground of Being, that God is not a being”.

⁹⁵ By his own admission, R. S. Thomas was not a very loving person: “I’m always ready to confess the things that are lacking in me [. . .] and particularly this lack of love for human beings”, he says in a 1999 interview. Perhaps not surprisingly, since his search for God was also a search to understand himself, Thomas says in the same interview that “loving God is too much of a human construct” (“A Poet Who Sang Creation”, *Daily Telegraph* 4 December 1999, 1; 7).

⁹⁶ M. Wynn Thomas, “R. S. Thomas and modern Welsh poetry” 168.

⁹⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992) 150.

that has disappeared".⁹⁸ Minhinnick views this as a weakness, but the very strength of the late poetry is in the "cuttings" and "sketches", each one a piece of the poet's vision, an experimental fragment. In Eliot's words, "each venture / Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment always deteriorating".⁹⁹

It should also be observed that Thomas's "new thinking" in science, which led to experiments with scientific language, subject matter, and metaphor, came in large part from his readings in contemporary science. Specifically, Thomas seems to have responded to the popular writings of two physicists, Fritjof Capra and Paul Davies. These writers offered the poet a view of the scientific world that went beyond rote, mechanical thinking and concerned itself with the spiritual. In *The Tao of Physics* (1975),¹⁰⁰ Capra makes a case for a union between scientific and religious thought that is very similar to many of R. S. Thomas's statements. Notably, Capra argues that "all things and events perceived by the senses [. . .] are but different aspects or manifestations of the same *ultimate reality*", and he maintains that the foundations of twentieth-century physics, including "attempts [. . .] to describe the phenomena of the submicroscopic world" are essentially mystical by nature.¹⁰¹ Thomas refers to Capra, and *The Tao of Physics*, in his 1988 *Undod* (Unity) lecture, arguing that it is contemporary physicists like Capra who have discovered "just how mysterious the universe is, and that we need qualities such as imagination and intuition and a mystical attitude if we are to begin to discover its secrets" (SP 147). Thomas also points to Capra in "Probings", mentioning his work in conjunction with that of Davies: "I have been interested in the tendency of recent physics to harmonize to some extent with Eastern theology and have read some of the

⁹⁸ "Living with R. S. Thomas" 13.

⁹⁹ From "East Coker" V, lines 7-9, *Four Quartets*. In a sense this was always true of Thomas. At Manafon, each attempt to come to terms with Iago Prytherch was a fresh one, and it is this which causes there to be so many responses, often contradictory, to Prytherch and the Welsh hill farmers.

¹⁰⁰ *The Tao of Physics* (London: Wildwood House, 1975). An edition of the book was in Thomas's personal library at the time of his death.

¹⁰¹ These excerpts from *The Tao of Physics* are cited in *The Columbia Documentary History of Religion in America Since 1945*, eds. Paul Harvey and Philip Goff (New York: Columbia UP, 2005) 128, italics added.

works of Fritjof Capra and Paul Davies".¹⁰² In *God and the New Physics* (1983),¹⁰³ Davies writes:

It is my deep conviction that only by understanding the world in all its many aspects—reductionist and holistic, mathematical and poetical, through forces, fields, and particles as well as through good and evil—that we will come to understand ourselves and the meaning behind the universe, our home.¹⁰⁴

This paragraph creates a strong rationale for a melding of images derived from science with those derived from religious reflection. And R. S. Thomas's search for God is, as we have observed, also a search to "come to understand [himself]". Davies's conviction is that understanding of self, of the universe, of science and poetry, requires a breadth of thinking and knowledge. It also requires *unity*, a union of our selves and the universe. The world's metaphor, its language, in all its variety, should be embraced:

There is a long sigh
from the shore, the wave clearing
its throat to address us, requiring
no answer than the due
we give these things that share
the world with us, that compose
the world: an ever-renewed
symphony to be listened to
admiringly, even as we perform
it on whatever instruments
the generations put into our hands.
(*"Andante"* EA 61)

The very elements that "compose / the world" are the elements Thomas uses to compose the world of his poems. His work can be "ever-renewed" because he has learned to compose on modern instruments, which time has placed into his hands. Despite the need for unity with the world's composition, the resulting "symphony" is often discordant, even disintegrated, and in this lies an interesting comparison. In music, the roots of symphonic form are grounded in harmony; indeed, it can be argued that

¹⁰² "Probings" 36.

¹⁰³ Like *The Tao of Physics*, *God and the New Physics* was among the books in Thomas's personal library at the time of his death.

¹⁰⁴ *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983) 229.

tonal logic *is* the basis of the symphony, at least from a historical point of view. Thus, some music critics, like literary critics, argue that “if the succession of tonalities is not clear, [the symphony] loses its momentum and balance”, and “some new factor must be found to give the modern symphony an excuse for existing”.¹⁰⁵ And yet, modern composers, like modern poets, often feel that obscured tonalities and unbalanced forms most accurately reflect their experiences in the modern world. R. S. Thomas—who realized that the metaphoric music of this world is often “one grass blade / grat[ing] on another as member / of a disdained orchestra” (“Retired” *MHT* 23); and who realized that modern “music” can be, and often is, composed by people like Adolf Eichmann, who “played on his / / victims’ limbs the symphony / of perdition” (*ERS* 23)—opened himself to the possibilities of modern metaphor, and his expanded perception required a corresponding expansion of technique.

While R. S. Thomas’s evolving subject matter, and his stylistic experimentation, was clearly motivated by his reading, he was also motivated by a desire to make his poems relevant to a contemporary audience:

The reason I have tried to write poems containing scientific images and which show some knowledge of the nature of science, is because, owing to the enormous part science and technology play in our daily lives, a divorce of poetry from them would be injurious to the development of poetry and would alienate people from it.¹⁰⁶

It is important to remember that, as we discussed in the previous chapter, “The type of writer who turns his back on society and abjures all responsibility towards it [. . .] is almost unknown in Wales”.¹⁰⁷ One could argue that R. S. Thomas *the man* turned his back on modern Wales, escaping to Aberdaron, where he was further from the pressures of modernity (with the exception, of course, of the Aberdaron tourists, who rarely failed to cause a relapse of the claustrophobic vicar syndrome). But R. S. Thomas *the poet* never

¹⁰⁵ Douglas Moore, *A Guide to Musical Styles* (New York: Norton, 1962) 295.

¹⁰⁶ “Probings” 37.

¹⁰⁷ Glyn Jones, *The Dragon has Two Tongues* 135.

“abjures all responsibility towards [Wales]”, or the world beyond. The poems maintain a public awareness. In fact, the expanse of Llŷn *broadens* the poet’s awareness, and a sometime-claustrophobic vicar—whose public poetry was once limited by a strident, narrow rhetoric—relaxes his polemic. He begins to reflect the modern world, to speak to it in its language, *from the inside*, rather than railing against it from behind self-erected barriers.

By embracing pure science, R. S. Thomas is able to “move with the times”;¹⁰⁸ moreover, he is also able to warn against the *misuse* of science, what he calls “The Frankenstein spectre”.¹⁰⁹ Marshall McLuhan points out the importance of the artist as a kind of seer in the technological age:

The effects of technology do not occur at the levels of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance. The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception.¹¹⁰

In Thomas’s case, the artist is “aware of the changes in sense perception” because he is also *participating* in those changes and actively trying to embody them in his poetry. Both in subject matter and technique, his lines reflect the modern age: its communication and language, its instability and fragmentation, its evolving metaphors, its starved spirit.

Thomas brings all of these to God-quest, laying his words on poetry’s altar:

God,
I whispered, refining
my technique, signalling
to him on the frequencies
I commanded.

¹⁰⁸ “Probings” 35: “We must move with the times; even our art”.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 37: “[The machine] serves us, but at a price, and the Frankenstein spectre is never far off, as science fiction’s success shows”.

¹¹⁰ *Essential McLuhan*, eds. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (New York: Basic Books, 1995) 159.

Thomas quotes McLuhan’s most famous argument when, in his introduction to *A Choice of Wordsworth’s Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), he argues that “a poem’s message is in itself. One can no more tear apart form and content in a poem than body and soul in a human being. *The medium is the message!*” (18).

Technique must constantly be refined if the poet is to master modern frequencies of communication and use them in his worship. The line breaks here emphasize key words—"God", "refining", "signalling", "frequencies", "commanded"—and the line breaks once again accentuate pronouns: "refining / *my* technique, signalling / to *him* on the frequencies / *I* commanded". The lineation breaks sentences into fragments, suggesting an unstable setting for communication, and also that communication is itself unstable. At times, this instability extends beyond lineation and into spatial arrangement:

He had strange dreams
 that were real
 in which he saw God
 showing him an aperture
 of the horizon wherein
 were flasks and test-tubes.
 And the rainbow
 ended there not in a pot
 of gold, but in colours
 that, dissected, had the ingredients of
 the death ray.
 ("Roger Bacon" F 40)

Here, as in other poems from this period, sentences are "dissected",¹¹¹ reflecting instability, but because the poem itself has "the ingredients of / the death ray",¹¹² its lines become even more volatile. They behave like *free radicals*, atoms with rogue electrons, as they vibrate and shape-shift. The implication is that Roger Bacon, arguably the father of experimental science, also possessed these same "ingredients". In other words, the poem is structurally mimetic because it represents both the reactionary components of "the death ray" and the volatile thinking of Roger Bacon, who possessed "the kind of mind that can drive [one] to invent deadly and ruinous things" (A 107). As Pikoulis says of

¹¹¹ The idea of dissecting nature's beauty—in this case a rainbow—is a nod to Wordsworth's famous lines from "The Tables Turned": Sweet is the lore which Nature brings; / Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:— / We murder to dissect". These lines have, from the time they were published, always been used as a powerful statement against mechanical science, and Thomas mentions them in his introduction to *A Choice of Wordsworth's Verse*: "[Wordsworth's formal choices] decry too great an indulgence of the scientific spirit, which 'murders to dissect' and which would 'botanise upon a mother's grave'" (18).

¹¹² Thomas perhaps has in mind Nikola Tesla's supposed "death ray", a particle beam weapon that Tesla was supposed to have invented in the 1920s. See Margaret Cheney, *Tesla: Man Out of Time* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001) 290.

another poem, lines “crackle with tension; they slip, slide, will not stay in place [. . .] as if in reaction to the discovery of how vulnerable life now is”.¹¹³ Thomas has indeed discovered vulnerability, volatility, and “ruinous things”, “the galaxies’ / violence, the meaningless wastage / of force” (“Balance” F 49), and his poetry reflects these realities even as it addresses them.

Among the books in Thomas’s personal library when he died was I. T. Ramsey’s *Religion and Science: Conflict and Synthesis*. Thomas rarely made notes or comments in the margins of his books, but he did make a noteworthy annotation in Ramsey’s book. At one point, Ramsey uses a biblical story to build a bridge between science and religion. He recounts the story of the prophet Nathan, who confronts King David about his many evils. David, according to Ramsey, has been in a kind of denial or mental fog, but by confronting David, Nathan makes him self-aware, obliges him to open a previously-closed mind.¹¹⁴ Ramsey relates this to the moral obligation that must be present in both religion and science. According to Ramsey, an aware personality “can allow for and welcome the full and ever-expanding range of scientific inquiry; it can also help bridge the moral, for it is a concept rooted in and common to both types of discourse”.¹¹⁵ Next to this passage, which Thomas has marked with a (*), is a question written in Thomas’s hand: “Who is to act as a Nathan to the scientist?” R. S. Thomas’s later poetry is an answer to his own question.¹¹⁶ He takes it upon himself, as a poet in the Welsh tradition and as a poet of the modern age, to act as a warning voice and “help bridge the moral” between modes of enquiry. In an interview with Simon Barker, he outlines the need for such a voice:

¹¹³ Pikoulis, “The Curious Stars” 86. Pikoulis is describing “Castaway” (YO 27), but the description is appropriate to many poems of this period.

¹¹⁴ See KJV 2 Sam. 12.

¹¹⁵ *Religion and Science: Conflict and Synthesis* (London: SPCK, 1964) 43.

¹¹⁶ Thomas’s later poetry also answers one of his earlier questions, which he asks in “Words and the Poet” (1964): “A vast amount of new knowledge is accumulating, with its accompanying vocabulary. One of the great questions facing the poet is: Can significant poetry be made with these new words and terms?” (SP 66).

[The artist] is, through his sensitivity and his imagination, and his humanity I would say, is in a way the only hope for society. [. . .] The scientist tries to disclaim responsibility by saying, We are not responsible for the use you make. Roger Bacon says, I have discovered this explosive but don't blame me for the use you put it to. Well, human beings, as I say, because they're unimaginative, because they're greedy, fleshly, weak, you know, all these things, they *will* misuse it. [. . .] I think the only hope for society—or the main hope, I won't put it at the only hope—the main hope for society is through the artist, because he's a man of vision; [. . .] he has an understanding of human needs and frailties.¹¹⁷

This passage reveals how Thomas's private poems become public: the artist's own imagination and vision have the potential to create awareness in others. As Thomas writes elsewhere, the artist can "mak[e] private and personal and dear things universal [. . .] in verse which is contemporary".¹¹⁸ By examining his own "human needs and frailties", and by doing so in progressive, even experimental poetry, R. S. Thomas does not "disclaim responsibility". Neither does he continue to rail, as he did at Eglwys-fach, against those who *lack* vision. Instead, he seeks to become "the main hope for society" by holding a mirror up to it. He believes that "because of his clear-sightedness a poet is less easy to dupe, so in a way does have an obligation to warn his neighbours against the conditioned or stock response".¹¹⁹ "The New Mariner" (BHN 99), which is of course a play on Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, suggests this "obligation". In Coleridge's poem, the Ancient Mariner has a message, gained from profound experience, that he is compelled to share; accordingly, he stops a guest on his way to a wedding and gives his message, a message of the ultimate harmony of the creation *and* the dangers of mindless, unimaginative individualism and violence. The mariner, like the poet, brings a message of the need for unity within the created universe. The wedding itself is a symbol of that unity. While Thomas's "New Mariner" "cannot decipher" his own message, that

¹¹⁷ *Probing the God-Space* 318.

¹¹⁸ Letter to Christine Evans (1972), quoted in Rogers, 241: "To make private and personal and dear things universal is one of the great tasks in which only a few poets succeed. This is made more difficult by the times. The rocks at Braich-y-Pwyll are some 600 million years old. The main human reverberations here are from vanished hermits and pilgrims, and nameless peasant farmers and fishermen. How do we reconcile these with television aerials and the cheap bric-a-brac of Aberdaron tourism and write about it in verse which is contemporary?"

¹¹⁹ "Probings" 32.

message—raw, shifting, and fragmented—may nevertheless be the very message needed in a fragmented world. Thus, the poet feels compelled to “[worry] the ear / of the passer-by, hot on his way / to the marriage of plain fact with plain fact”. This marriage, unlike its counterpart in Coleridge’s poem, does not symbolize unity. “Plain fact” is what thoughtless, spirit-less scientists wield; combinations, or “marriages”, of these facts eventually give birth to “the cold acts of the machine” (“The Gap” LS 37). R. S. Thomas is a “Nathan” to the breeders and practitioners of “plain fact”.

And where, we might ask Thomas’s detractors, are the stylistic models for such poetry? What form, for example, can contain malleable gasses and shifting atoms? Which “respectable prosody”,¹²⁰ we might ask Donald Davie, is the appropriate mimetic for time dilation, Doppler red shift, or a black hole? What line or syntax can contain the process of radioactive decay, symbolized by the imaginative dynamism of “radioactive verses”?¹²¹ Is there a stanza pattern that can neatly contain these metaphors for eclectic, often uncertain, spiritual probing, and for humanity’s disintegrating spirit? Adrienne Rich, whose work we discussed in the previous chapter, once described her early use of poetic form as “asbestos gloves” because “it allowed [her] to handle materials [she] couldn’t pick up barehanded”.¹²² Later in her career, Rich abandoned rhyme and metre in favour of a free verse that she could adapt as she directly confronted unique experiences. This was also the case with R. S. Thomas. He found that

the established conventions of poetry were as about as useful [. . .] as a map would be for an astronaut. A modern poet’s explorations in faith *require the reformation of language* and they lead to a discovery that in looking merely for a lost world of belief he has entered a boundless universe of spiritual experience.¹²³

¹²⁰ “R. S. Thomas’s Poetry of the Church of Wales” 130: “It is as if this sole device [of ruthless enjambments] constitute for him a prosody; and we may legitimately protest that a respectable prosody must comprehend a good deal more than this”.

¹²¹ In *The Echoes Return Slow*, Thomas describes himself as “composer of the first / radio-active verses” (75).

¹²² “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”, *College English* 34.1 (1972): 18-25.

¹²³ M. Wynn Thomas, “Reviewing R. S. Thomas” 6, italics added.

And it is experience most of all that is reflected in Thomas's late prosody. We have discussed the fragmented spiritual world of the poems, and it is perhaps obvious by now that this was a reflection of a fragmented poet, a perpetually estranged R. S. Thomas for whom "there was no developing / structure", but rather "the dismantling / by the self of a self it / could not reassemble" ("In Context" F 13). R. S. Thomas's poems are, on one hand, obsessive experiments in a *personal* God-quest, and they are also, on the other, a consciously-contemporized *public* voice, a kind of "Nathan to the scientist" in a technology-driven world, meant to increase awareness and accountability.¹²⁴ It is a contradiction that contributes to the quasi-disintegration of Thomas's poetic structures, and to a style that exemplifies instability, uncertainty, and constant change. One can argue, as some critics have, that the poems suffer for this. But one can also conclude, as Jeremy Hooker has, that the poems exhibit "a greater strength and intensity" than any of Thomas's earlier work, that he "sounds vibrancies, and signals given and received, with an unmistakable voice", and that this period therefore represents "the culmination of the greatest phase of [R. S. Thomas's] writing".¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Justin Wintle, whose "biography" of R. S. Thomas is uneven in its focus and, it must be said, occasionally inaccurate, is nevertheless spot-on when it comes to the *public* nature of Thomas's spiritual poetry: "R. S. seeks to deflect us from a soiled world of ordinary temporal and material concern [. . .]. If he fails in this, [. . .] the fault may not be his: it is we perhaps who have lost the capacity to be entranced, to be deflected. Imagination's flint cannot strike sparks off a pillow or lettuce" (*Furious Interiors* 441).

¹²⁵ Jeremy Hooker, *The Presence of the Past* 137.

Chapter 5: A Style (Un)Refined (1988-2000)

There is no God but God. This is what exists at the centre of things, the unity in which everyone can see the reason for, and the meaning of, the life of the whole of creation and of their own little personal lives. It was a sublime and triumphant vision which inspired man's greatest works in art, music, and literature. And it is far from finished with even today. Indeed, there are signs that this will be the creed of the future, too [. . .].
(“Unity” SP 144)

R. S. Thomas left Aberdaron, and his forty years as a clergyman, behind in 1978, retiring to the four-hundred-year-old cottage at Sarn-y-Plas, just a few miles to the northeast. The cottage—made famous by a somewhat devious Howard Barlow photograph that depicts Thomas leaning over the half-door, looking every bit the formidable “Ogre of Wales” of popular myth—overlooks the bay at Porth Neigwl, or Hell’s Mouth. In *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988), perhaps the most important volume from this period, Thomas describes the cottage as “a sounding box in which the sea’s moods made themselves felt” (104) and, like those of the sea, the poet’s own, fluctuant moods pervade his late work, often bringing currents of isolation and despair. *The Echoes Return Slow*, as Brown observes, was “written in Elsi’s last long illness”,¹ and much of *Mass for Hard Times* (1992) was written in the wake of her passing. Thomas, who had, in one sense, always been estranged, now found himself alone in a haunting cottage.² At Sarn-y-Plas, “lights turn / to sores in the mist”, and it often appears that landscape and seascape “[have] nothing / to teach but that time / is the spirit’s privation” (“Plas-yn-Rhiw” MHT 30). But the sea has calmer tides as well; indeed, there is an increased attention to balance in the late work,

¹ R. S. Thomas 104.

² From the beginning, Thomas describes the cottage in registers of haunting: “Living in a four-hundred-year-old cottage, and thinking of the tenants of that cottage throughout the centuries, he would imagine seeing their faces watching him from the stone walls” (A 109). Subsequently, Elsi’s absence, like God’s absence, becomes a haunting presence, particularly in *No Truce with the Furies* (1995). In “No Time” (33), her presence is sensed in “a tremor / of light” and “a bird crossing / the sun’s path”. In “The Morrow” (77), Thomas writes, “Later I was alone in my room / reading and, the door closed, / she was there, speechlessly enquiring: / Was all well?” And in “Still” (27), an owl seems to embody her presence: “Last night, as I loitered // where your small bones had their nest, / the owl blew away from your stone cross / softly as down from a thistle-head. I wondered”.

particularly as regards the self. With renewed persistence R. S. Thomas examines the self he has never fully known—its imprecision, its complexity, its composition over time. The tide's moods, as well as the poet's memories, wash up their detritus and wreckage, but there are also intermittent waves of unity, moments of calm when the fragments are made whole.

Of course, wholeness has never been entirely absent from Thomas's poetry. We saw, for example, the possibility of oneness in "Emerging" (LS 1), where Thomas writes of "the consciousness of myself in you, / of you in me", and "Andante" (EA 61), where the elements that "compose / the world" and "share / the world with us" are unified, "an ever renewed / symphony to be listened to / admiringly". There are other such moments, and, rare as they are, or perhaps *because* they are rare, they should not be ignored.³ They are momentary glimpses of a reality akin to Wordsworth's "central peace subsisting at the heart / of endless agitation",⁴ lines quoted by Thomas in his introduction to *A Choice of Wordsworth's Verse*, lines which for Thomas represent "the heights" of Wordsworth's abilities.⁵ The idea of a peace that is "central" is also echoed in Thomas's 1985 *Undod* (Unity) lecture, quoted at the head of this chapter, where he speaks of "what exists *at the centre of things*, the unity in which everyone can see the reason for, and the meaning of, the life of the whole of creation and of their own little personal lives" (SP 144, *italics added*),⁶ and he goes on to describe "a living web, which connects everything in the entire universe" (SP 148). For Thomas's search for ultimate reality within "the whole of creation" is also, crucially, a "personal" search for transcendence, a desire to overcome randomness and the related sense of isolation. While much of the

³ See, for example, "The Moor" (P 24), "Alive" (LS 51), "Suddenly" (LP 201), and "A Thicket in Lleyn" (EA 45).

⁴ From *The Excursion*, collected in *A Choice of Wordsworth's Verse* 132.

⁵ Ibid. 13. Thomas also includes these lines in his *Penguin Book of Religious Verse* 131.

⁶ One notes the difference between these expressions—unity "at the centre" and "central peace"—and the famous Yeatsian expression of modernity: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" ("The Second Coming" line 3).

poetry he writes in retirement continues to be emblematic of fragmentariness, a random universe, and a disintegrated self, Thomas's late style also reveals attempts to overcome these through acts of composition, both in poetry and, in the case of *The Echoes Return Slow*, corresponding adjacent prose. Indeed, in his efforts to organize *unrefined* environment and experience (especially insofar as experience relates to identity), Thomas further refines his mature poetic techniques.

In both interviews and prose writings, R. S. Thomas speaks of critical (mis)interpretations of his work.⁷ As we discussed in Chapter 3, one of his chief complaints is that critics are often too narrow in their analyses.⁸ One particularly narrow view is that Thomas's work is all bleakness and brokenness. For example, A. E. Dyson, who published Thomas's earlier work in *Critical Quarterly*, rightly describes Thomas as "a poet of the cross, the unanswered prayer, the bleak trek through darkness";⁹ however, Dyson does not allow any light to pierce that darkness, neglecting essential, if infrequent, moments of wholeness expressed in the poetry: "For some / it is all darkness; for me, too, / it is dark. But [. . .] sometimes a strange light / shines, purer than the moon" ("Groping" *F* 12). "At the End" (*NTF* 42), a poem generally (and correctly) seen as an example of late optimism in Thomas's work,¹⁰ also reads like a response—both thematic and formal—to critics who have been too narrow in their assessment of his vision:

By day
the passers-by, who are not
pilgrims, stare through the rain's

⁷ To Lethbridge, for example, Thomas speaks of "misunderstanding and misinterpretation on the part of the critics", and he refers to "careless columnists and people" who "just take refuge in laughter and derision" (*R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge* 47; 46).

⁸ In "The Making of a Poem", Thomas writes, "I am against those reviewers and columnists who pick out a bit of subject matter and say, 'You know, R. S. Thomas is a poet who writes about country matters and that sort of thing'. It is so very sweeping and so inadequate" (*JP* 86).

⁹ *Yeats, Eliot, and R. S. Thomas: Riding the Echo* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981) 296. Dyson's rather restrictive analysis of Thomas is surprising when one considers his longstanding interest in Thomas's work. It is also strange that even as he portrays Thomas as a poet "riding the echo" of Yeats and Eliot, both of whom expressed both fragmentation and wholeness in their work, Dyson does not apply this diversity of feeling, form, and imagery to Thomas's work.

¹⁰ The imagery of the poem inspired Wil Rowlands's painting of the same name, which appears on the cover of *Autobiographies* (1997).

bars, seeing me as prisoner
 of the one view, 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.

As we have discussed at several points throughout this thesis, R. S. Thomas has often been caricaturized as a reclusive, dour hermit (as in, for example, the above-mentioned Howard Barlow photograph) and/or as a Welshman obsessing over sullied and equally dour hill farmers. "At the End" is not specifically a response to these stereotypes, but it does address false conjectures made by "passers-by" who no doubt belong to "the city lights" that the speaker has "rejected". Lineation suggests that these "passers-by [. . .] are *not*"; that is, they are either imaginary or, more likely, have no substance. The linear turn then emphasizes *what* these "passers-by" are not: "pilgrims", fellow-seekers, those who share the poet's vision. More particularly, they do not share his vision of *himself*, which has always been elusive and shifting, never reducible to "one view". The word "rain's" gains increased attention from its line-end position, and the possessive construction increases anticipation so that the reader is propelled through the line break by both a desire for sentence completion and an unresolved question of ownership (the rain's *what?*). Thus, when the reader encounters "the rain's / bars" and then, owing to a comma, must immediately pause, the image of speaker-as-prisoner is exceptionally vivid, and the image is underscored as "bars" shares a line with "seeing me as prisoner". And it is the phrase "prisoner / of the one view" that is perhaps most significant. While there is a single outlook from Sarn-y-Plas over Porth Neigwl, this "view" is more expansive than any view from Aberdaron and can hardly be seen as imprisoning; in fact, it is a view of the enigmatic vastness of sea and sky which recurs in the last phase of Thomas's poetry. Thomas, then, is also, clearly, referring to his own "views", his perceptions, which are often seen as narrow in scope. Even critics who *do* read the work closely are sometimes

guilty of making Thomas into a “prisoner of [. . .] one view”. They fail to see, or at least fail to mention, the ebb and flow of “the tide’s pendulum truth”. Indeed, “At the End” concludes with an expression of faith, and its form reflects a development towards unity. The poem begins by constructing a life from fragments: “Few possessions: a chair, / a table, a bed / to say my prayers by [. . .] bone-like, crossed-sticks”. The tone and linear separation remind one of “Making” (*H’m* 17): “first moss, then grass” [. . .] “I thought up the flowers / Then birds” [. . .] animals / To divert me”. But, remarkably, a poem that begins as a list of fragments, expressed in lines that break across syntax, moves gradually toward alignment until, in its last four lines, lineation coincides with phrasing, creating a structural oneness, a unity of form that culminates in a rhymed couplet:

that the heart that is low now
will be at the full tomorrow.

This is not an exact rhyme any more than the poem expresses permanent oneness. The full heart will, like the tide, fall low once again. But to *fix* the poetry permanently in its lowness—as in “his subject matter has always been rather lowering”,¹¹ or “the lowered, daunted quality of the subject matter is matched by the same characteristics in the expression”¹²—is inaccurate, indeed irresponsible, a demonstration of the very critical narrowness of which Thomas often complained.

Thus, in the late poems, the tide is not only a metaphor for changing moods, but also for the fluctuating results of faith:

The waves run up the shore
and fall back. I run
up the approaches of God
and fall back.
(“Tidal” *MHT* 43)

Lines one and three are both broken before the phrase “and fall back”; their endings are like crested waves in the last moment before gravity claims them. Thomas breaks both

¹¹ John Wain, *Professing Poetry* 107.

¹² *Ibid.* 108.

lines in accordance with syntax, before a conjunction. This creates a rhythmic evenness, the lines breaking as the waves do. And, because a full stop follows each “fall back”, both “fallen” lines completely die out, exhausted. Line two, however, is not broken in accordance with syntax, emphasizing instead the speaker’s relationship to the tide: “I run / up the approaches of God”. Thomas turns this metaphor toward prayer, which he compares to waves breaking on God, then falling back.¹³ Yet it is the poem’s final image that is perhaps most relevant to our discussion of Thomas’s late style:

Let despair be known
as my ebb-tide; but let prayer
have its springs, too, brimming,
disarming him; discovering somewhere
among his fissures deposits of mercury
where trust may take root and grow.

The act of “disarming [God]” is perhaps a reference to breaking God’s silence, His preferred weapon,¹⁴ and removing obstacles to unity, but the poem also expresses the need to find trust “among [God’s] fissures”. Clearly, then, it is *within* the cracks and broken places that trust must “take root and grow”. The line break emphasizes this: “discovering somewhere / *among* his fissures”. Indeed, for R. S. Thomas, wholeness emerges *from* disorder (*c.f.* our discussion of “annihilation” in Chapter 4). This is why Thomas so often refers to Keats’s definition of negative capability: when he finds unity, he finds it “*in* uncertainties and doubts”.¹⁵ From a stylistic perspective, this generally translates into a verbal structure that is created line-by-line, “each moment of the going”,¹⁶ feeling its way through uncertainty before arriving at a provisional statement.

However, in the late poetry, there is also an intensified struggle to *order* that experience,

¹³ Thomas uses similar, yet less transient, imagery in *The Echoes Return Slow*: “It is then that I lie / in the lean hours awake listening / to the swell born somewhere in the Atlantic / rising and falling, rising and falling / [. . .] And the thought comes / of that other being who is awake, too, / *letting our prayers break on him* / not like this for a few hours, / but for days, years, for eternity” (79, italics added).

¹⁴ See, for instance, “The Combat” (LS 43): “But who you are / does not appear, nor why / on the innocent marches / of vocabulary you choose / to engage us, belabouring us / with your silence”.

¹⁵ In his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, Thomas writes, “Over every poet’s door is nailed Keats’s saying about negative capability. Poetry is born of the tensions set up by the poet’s ability to be ‘in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts and reason’” (11).

¹⁶ Olson, “Projective Verse” *Strong Words* 95.

as it relates to both the world and the self, and this can be seen in the structure of the poems, most notably in Thomas's late use of the stanza.¹⁷

The Sight-Stanza

I have seldom seen such disorder and brokenness—such a mass of
unrelated parts and things lying about. That's it! I concluded to myself.
An unrecognizable order! Actually—the new!¹⁸

"Thomas divides his stanzas in unusual ways," he cautioned his pupil.
"The last word of this stanza, '*What*,' is the first word in the next stanza,
actually. The meaning of the line doesn't end there".¹⁹

Both of the above excerpts are from works of fiction. The first is from William Carlos Williams's "Comedy Entombed: 1930" (1930). In Williams's story, the un-named protagonist doctor enters the living room of one of his patients and feels a "curious excitement" as he surveys the room.²⁰ Within the room's "disorder and brokenness", he soon recognizes a "new" order, previously "unrecognizable". This "order" is the sum of otherwise-unrelated parts, arranged in the doctor's mind. The second excerpt is from a chapter titled "Reading R. S. Thomas" in Kanzaburō Ōe's *Somersault* (2003). Kizu, a painter of distinction and co-leader of a religious sect, has discovered Thomas's work and is teaching it to Patron, one of the sect's original founders. The above excerpt is Kizu's response to Patron's misreading of "Threshold" (BHN 110), a misreading that occurs in part because of pagination, but also because of Patron's assumption that the penultimate stanza—

what balance is needed at
the edges of such an abyss.
I am alone on the surface
of a turning planet. What

¹⁷ Since the stanza has its tradition in rhyme patterns, the free verse "stanza" is perhaps more appropriately called a "line-grouping"; however, the term "stanza" is now commonly used in critical discussions of non-metrical, as well as metrical, prosody.

¹⁸ William Carlos Williams, "Comedy Entombed: 1930", *Make Light of It* (New York: Random House, 1950) 322.

¹⁹ Kanzaburō Ōe, *Somersault* (New York: Grove Press, 2003) 71.

²⁰ "Comedy Entombed: 1930" 322.

—is meant to stand alone when it is not. Taken together, the above excerpts are a good introduction to Thomas's late use of the stanza. First, he uses visual stanzas—what we, borrowing a term from Philip Jason, will call “sight-stanzas”—to unify what Williams calls “unrelated parts and things”, attempting to transcend “disorder and brokenness”. In fact, Thomas probably first encountered the sight-stanza in the poetry of Williams.²¹ Second, the statements by the character Kizu, namely that “Thomas divides his stanzas in unusual ways” and “the meaning of the line doesn't end [with the stanza]”, is important when we consider the manner in which Thomas uses “sight-stanzas” to approach order and wholeness. Beginning in *Frequencies* (1978), and increasingly in the later work, poems are written in strophes which resemble each other, both in length of line and number of lines, creating a kind of visual symmetry that affects the way the poem is perceived and read. In order to appreciate this technique, we will need to move beyond the idea that the visual, or graphic, component of poetry is merely the transcription of sound, that the eye must always be subordinate to the ear. What was once an oral genre is now—poetry readings and *eisteddfodau* notwithstanding—largely encountered as printed text;²² thus, spatiality, rendered via typography, can become part of a poem's prosody because it affects the way a poem is read. It groups, divides, and juxtaposes material in ways other than strictly linear.

Unlike critical-theoretical approaches to the line in poetry, which are extremely diverse, critical commentary on the stanza has been surprisingly consistent. A

²¹ In “Probing”, Thomas tells John Barnie, “You are correct in thinking that William Carlos Williams was influential in my change of form in certain poems, as being apter for new subject matter and new thinking” (*Miraculous Simplicity* 44).

²² There remains, of course, an oral tradition in poetry that often contributes to the dramatic and/or rhetorical nature of contemporary poems, and to poems which lean heavily on aural features. This tradition is probably stronger in Wales than in England or America, owing to poetry's public role and the active tradition of *eisteddfodau*. There is certainly a strong rhetorical quality, for example, to the poetry of Dylan Thomas; in fact, there is probably no more self-consciously aural poet in the twentieth century, though one is also quick to note that Dylan Thomas also experimented with concrete, or shape poetry in “Vision and Prayer” and often used “shaped” stanzas—where some lines are indented or shortened to give stanzas a dynamic visual shape—in major poems such as “Poem in October” and “Fern Hill”.

characteristic description of the stanza appears in Philip Jason's piece, "Stanzas and Anti-Stanzas":

The material of the poem is divided into roughly equal units suggesting equivalent weight. The white space between each pair of stanzas stands for some shift in perspective, emotion, imagery, or thought. Variations from the normative stanzaic patterns are purposefully crafted to create a range of special relationships among stanza materials. The shaping of the poem into stanzas contributes to the effect and meaning of the poem in demonstrable ways; the deviations from the produced or implied stanzaic norms have meaning when observed against the normative pattern.²³

In R. S. Thomas's early work, stanzas more or less fall in line with Jason's description.

They are almost always self-contained, sentences do not cross the white space between

stanzas, and white space "stands for some shift". In Thomas's middle to late work,

poems are often stichic, having no stanzas at all, but when poems are stanzaic, their

stanzas are, almost without exception, also self-contained.²⁴ Any number of poems could

be used to illustrate this. "Sorry" (BT 12) will serve our purpose:

Dear parents,
I forgive you my life,
Begotten in a drab town,
The intention was good;
Passing the street now,
I see still the remains of sunlight.

It was not the bone buckled;
You gave me enough food
To renew myself.
It was the mind's weight
Kept me bent, as I grew tall.

It was not your fault.
What should have gone on,
Arrow aimed from a tried bow

²³ Philip K. Jason, "Stanzas and Anti-Stanzas", *College English* 39.6 (1978): 744.

²⁴ Because many of Thomas's mid-period lyrics are divided into two strophes—one of eight lines, one of six—some critics have taken to calling them sonnets. For example, R. G. Thomas writes of "a short sharp burst of a poem, frequently of sonnet form with an octosyllabic line and the merest hint of an assonantal rhyme, and with a clear-cut antithesis between octave and sestet" ("Humanus Sum: a Second Look at R. S. Thomas", *Critical Writings on R. S. Thomas* 46). While these "sharp bursts" are often very good poems, they are not very good sonnets and do not strive to be. There is often no turn, or "clear-cut antithesis", between the two stanzas. Rhyme, if it is present, is idiosyncratic and does not follow a sonnet scheme. Donald Davie is therefore correct when he writes that this type of poem "is a sonnet only on the understanding that all fourteen-line poems are sonnets" ("R. S. Thomas's Poetry of the Church of Wales" 129).

At a tried target, has turned back,
 Wounding itself
 With questions you had not asked.

Here is a poem “divided into roughly equal units suggesting equivalent weight”. Though there is some enjambment, it never cuts sharply across syntax, and many lines are end-stopped. Each stanza is closed. The first stanza surprises by juxtaposing two seemingly incongruent lines, the first a term of endearment, the second a statement of forgiveness that expresses a regretted life: “Dear parents, / I forgive you my life”. This startling expression is coupled with imagery from the speaker’s place of birth—“drab town”, “the remains of sunlight”—to establish a tone of loss and distance, of darkened expectations. There is a tone of resignation that shades toward defeatism in line four: “The intention was good”. White space then allows for a shift in thought between the first stanza and the second stanza, which compares physical nourishment with mental (and possibly spiritual) nourishment. The stanza builds on the parent-child relationship, but it is a new phase of the speaker’s thought process and as such warrants its own stanza. The stanza ends with complex images of mental and physical growth; accordingly, the white space preceding the final stanza represents time, the years of growth between childhood and adulthood, so that when we reach the third and final stanza, we are no longer in the speaker’s memory, but in his present, the point from which he is speaking. The emotion of memory now brought into the present (formally as well as chronologically), the speaker turns on himself, using the metaphor of a wounding arrow that behaves more like a boomerang. David Lloyd suggests that “Thomas forgives his parents for keeping his body healthy while wounding his spirit”,²⁵ but the poet is turning on himself, not his parents; he is realizing, possibly for the first time, that his spiritual wounds are self-inflicted. His parents, who would not have asked these questions, are not to blame; or

²⁵ “Through the Looking Glass: R. S. Thomas’s *The Echoes Return Slow* as Poetic Autobiography”, *Twentieth Century Literature* 42.4 (1996): 443.

rather, there is no blame in the fact that they were not introspective in the same manner as he.²⁶ The point to be made, however, is that there are three distinct movements within “Sorry”, shifts that represent the stages of the speaker’s thought process, his memory and reflection, as well as specific periods of his life, and that each of these movements is housed within a strophic boundary. The poem therefore falls nicely in line with Jason’s description: “the white space between each pair of stanzas stands for some shift in perspective, emotion, imagery, or thought”.

However, when discussing “Stanzas and Anti-Stanzas”, Jason is primarily concerned with the latter, or what he sees as the *false* use of stanzas. These are the opening words of his piece:

One of the more disturbing habits of contemporary practitioners of poetry is that of casting their non-stanzaic works in stanzaic shapes. For reasons that are either unclear or suspect, a phenomenon which may be called the “sight-stanza” has developed: on the printed page, the poem looks stanzaic, but no clear principle of stanzaic composition justifies this appearance.²⁷

To this Jason adds, “To borrow the prestige of stanzaic form without paying the price of stanzaic control is a deceit”.²⁸ Based on this description, and on his earlier description of successful stanza use, Jason would have found R. S. Thomas’s late use of the stanza very disconcerting, even deceitful at times. Although Thomas’s stanzas *are* an attempt at “stanzaic control”, the stanzas do not always “[pay] the price” in the way Jason prefers. Beginning in *Frequencies*, Thomas increasingly violates the boundaries of the stanza, crossing white space, and he often does so without any discernible, transitional “shift”. One of the first poems to reflect this change, one that is also a good illustration of the reasons *for* the change, is “The White Tiger” (F 45):

²⁶ The phrase “What should have gone on, / Arrow aimed from a tried bow / At a tried target, has turned back” is probably a reference to Thomas’s mother, who seems to have chosen his profession for him. Thomas did not “turn back” from that profession, but he did question it constantly. It was meant to be a safe career move, “a true target” that would ensure a comfortable living. But of course Thomas’s life proved to be anything but comfortable.

²⁷ “Stanzas and Anti-Stanzas” 738.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

It was beautiful as God
must be beautiful; glacial
eyes that had looked on
violence and come to terms

with it; a body too huge
and majestic for the cage in which
it had been put; up
and down in the shadow

of its own bulk it went,
lifting, as it turned,
the crumpled flower of its face
to look into my own

face without seeing me. It
was the colour of the moonlight
on snow and as quiet
as moonlight, but breathing

as you can imagine that
God breathes within the confines
of our definition of him, agonising
over immensities that will not return.

Certainly "The White Tiger" is *visually* stanzaic. Each line-grouping contains the same number of lines as the others, and all lines are left-justified and of approximately equal length.²⁹ Thus, there is a typographic balance which suggests order and evenness. But these stanzas do not function as quatrains except in the broadest definition of that term, and the visual order is seemingly at odds with the poem's lineation. As we have discussed at length, systematic enjambment creates a sense of disorder by continually cutting across syntax and forcing adjustments. In the first stanza alone, several adjustments are necessary. The first line apparently stands alone, a straight simile: "It was beautiful as God". After the line break, however, the sentence continues, "as God / must be beautiful". This adjustment, as it so often does, accents the first word of the *contre-rejet*. The phrase can be read as a kind of imaginative conjecture, even wistfulness, as in the

²⁹ The lines of Thomas's free verse do approximate each other in length, and this can be seen as a visual technique, but the operations of his linear prosody do not allow him to cut off the end of each line at *precisely* the same visual point. Sight-stanzas can be level on three sides, but the fourth, the right "side" of the stanzaic structure, cannot be made into an even plane without sacrificing the fundamental effects of counterpoint.

sentence, “Heaven must be a beautiful place”. But it can also be more forceful, representing a label we put on God—“God / *must* be beautiful”—an unyielding (and unrealistic) requirement that “truth *should* defer / To beauty” (“Petition” *H’m* 2, italics added). The adjective “glacial” at the end of line two is first read as a description of God, whom we momentarily picture as a giant, cold mass with the potential to destroy. But “glacial”, we then realize, modifies “eyes” in line three, so the coldness and potential destructiveness is transferred to, and personified by, the tiger, which becomes a symbol for God and God’s attributes. Line three seemingly stands alone. “Eyes that had looked on” are observing eyes, watching eyes, but they are also detached. In other words, God “looks on” but does not intervene. This creates a brief calm before the line break, after which “violence” disrupts that calm; “violence” is given greater impact as a result of both its position at the head of the line and a forced adjustment in grammar: the verb changes from an intransitive verb, “to look on”, to a transitive verb, “to look on / *violence*”. Line four ends with the phrase “come to terms”, but the phrase is incomplete; in Kizu’s words, “The meaning of the line doesn’t end there”. The tiger has “looked on / violence and come to terms // *with it*”. This is certainly ambiguous, and the white space enhances the uncertainty because pushing the sentence resolution into the next stanza asks the reader to carry the anticipation of sentence completion across both line break *and* stanza break. One interpretation is that God has come to physical terms with violence because he has literally felt the violence of the human world when He was a part of it.³⁰ Another interpretation is that God has come to terms *with* violence; that is, he has *used* violence to attend to humankind. The line break, exaggerated by a concurrent stanza break, certainly emphasizes the word “with”. This interpretation corresponds to the God of “Soliloquy”, or the even more terrifying God of “The Island” (*H’m* 20). Or, simply, the line may

³⁰ The theme of a God who is scarred by His human incarnation occurs frequently in Thomas’s late work. God has “burned himself / before in the human flame / and escaped, leaving the reason / torn” (“The Empty Church” F 35).

suggest that the tiger has accepted violence as necessary. Interestingly, all three of these potential portrayals of God exist elsewhere in Thomas's work, and the ambiguity of interpretation—which is also a *diversity* of interpretation—corresponds to the unpredictability and multi-dimensional nature of the tiger. If one, for instance, interprets “with” as an expression of God's violence, then the violence of the first stanza intensifies as it is carried into the second because the violence is no longer merely being “looked on” but is now being used. However, if God has accepted violence and is merely looking on, a detached observer, then the second stanza is somewhat anticlimactic. The violence still crosses white space, but only as a pronoun, “it”, not nearly as threatening as its antecedent noun, “violence”, which remains safely behind, on the other side of white space. The unsettled (and unsettling) form of the poem is therefore an example of structural mimesis: the threat of the tiger moves “up / and down”, in one's face or behind safe bars, tearing into the stanza, or remaining on the other side of white space, either an impending menace or a “flower”, harmless as “moonlight” and “snow”. Much could be said about the poem's other stanzas, but we can already conclude that the relatively static *visual* order of stanzas in “The White Tiger” is at odds with the poem's dynamic, continually-adjusting linear interiors, and this creates structural and creative tension which, in turn, helps create meaning. Hartman refers to this technique as “gesturing casually towards imposed order without accepting the kind applied by regular [metrical] stanzas”,³¹ but in Thomas's case it is much more than this. The very structure that ostensibly holds this poem together betrays an underlying anxiety, an interior force exerting pressure against its frame. *Pace* Jason's argument that the reasons for the sight-stanza are “unclear” and “suspect”, R. S. Thomas could not have chosen a more appropriate form as the mimetic for a “violent” animal “too huge / and majestic for [its]

³¹ *Free Verse* 155.

cage”,³² and for a God made uneasy by “the confines / of our definition of him”. These stanzas reveal a struggle to contain what resists containment, a way of “look[ing] on / violence and com[ing] to [structural] terms // with it”.

Similar poetic structures—where visually-congruent stanzas are open, and their lines systematically enjambed—occur frequently in R. S. Thomas’s late work. Thomas’s proclivity for experimentation, and for adapting form to the needs of each individual poem, prevents any form from becoming an inflexible pattern, but the use of sight-stanzas is much more pronounced in the late work and can be seen as one of its most relevant stylistic features. Flexible free verse continues to reflect the often volatile materials of experience while stanzaic structures, which echo the form-seeking interiors of the poet, attempt to order what would otherwise be disparate:

Waking and wondering
when was I and where
had I been? Standing back

from myself, beginning to recall
uterine experience,
an antiphonal music

in infinite counterpoint
between mirror and mirror.
Time was technology’s

folk-tale. My introspection
could have been called a navel
engagement; the truth my ability

to hold all things in play;
bringing beauty to birth
out of my unbreached side.

My apostrophes were to myself
only. I found when I leaned
closer, the second person

³² Ted Hughes’s poem “The Jaguar” may be somewhere in the back of Thomas’s mind. That poem, too, expresses restlessness, as well as the incapacity of bars to constrain the energy of “a jaguar hurrying enraged / Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes / On a short fierce fuse” (*Ted Hughes: Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003] 19-20).

did not exist. Vertical in my
 dimensionless presence I kept calling
 to the undying echoes: 'Prove that I lie.'
 ("Sonata in X" *MHT* 81)

"Sonata in X" is a long poem written in untitled movements, each of which could stand alone as a poem in its own right. The above poem-within-the-poem begins by disorienting the reader. We are initially unsure whether "waiting" and "wondering" are nouns or verbs, until we realize in line three that the first "sentence" of the poem is a gerund phrase. The second "sentence" also happens to be a gerund phrase. Thus, throughout the first three stanzas, we follow the movement of lines in anticipation of completion that never arrives. As in "The White Tiger", sight-stanzas ensure that we are given text in even distribution, but the initial grammatical confusion, coupled with lines that cut against syntax and cross stanza breaks, works against the poem's visual order, again creating structural tension, an underlying anxiety. Until we reach the third line, the syntax, "wondering / when was I and where", is unsettling. What we discover, though, upon further reading is that "Sonata in X" is about identity, and the speaker is looking back on a life and trying to locate the point in time when he was most authentically the "I" that is himself, as in "when was *I* and when / had *I* been?" The speaker is displaced, lacking an awareness of time and place and authenticity; thus, the confusion we experience as readers is appropriate and intended. The poem is the mimetic of a disconcerted speaker who is trying to step back and look at his life with detachment. This is perfectly embodied by the first stanza break, which creates distance between speaker and self: "Standing back // from myself". Ironically, the speaker desires to understand the self, to draw *closer* to genuineness, but in order to do so, he must step back and attempt to see clearly. One notes that this is not far removed from the early poems, where the speaker tries to understand the hill farmer (who is often a persona for the poet) by considering him from a distance. But now, rather than observe the self through

the *indirect* act of observing another, the speaker confronts himself directly.³³ In this sense, the X of the poem's title invites comparisons to an X-ray, which looks inward. However, also like an X-ray, the speaker's image of self is a nebulous outline, a picture of "bent bones [. . .] fractured / By life" ("The Kingdom" *H'm* 34).

This image of the self, formed by experience, is full of ambiguity. "Uterine experience", for example, is an ambiguous term. It may be a literal reference to the speaker's beginnings since Thomas does trace his life back to the womb in the late work, most vividly in *The Echoes Return Slow*, and the pun "navel / engagement" relates the speaker's "introspection" to the place of the attached, or rather detached, umbilical cord.³⁴ But "uterine" may also be a metaphor for a sense of self that is still developing, a kind of "embryonic thought".³⁵ Alternatively, "uterine experience" may refer to *all* experience that is enclosed and dark, where one must "[grope] his way up to the light" (*ERS* 2). Certainly this is what R. S. Thomas is doing in the late work, searching for "the one light that can cast such shadows" ("Somewhere" *LS* 46). And, as we have discussed, the search for God is also a search for self. In this light, the X in the poem's title is the unknown quantity in $X = \text{self}$. "Sonata in X" is not a "Song of Myself"; it is the song of the missing, or unknown, self. A sonata is of course written in a key: C major, B minor, F flat minor, etc. A sonata written in X is off the staff, unrecognizable, gone like the Christ in X-mas. The reference to "antiphonal music" is notable. "Antiphonal music" is performed by two halves of a divided choir, each singing alternate musical phrases.³⁶ In one sense, Thomas's own songs are divided; "I like now polyphony", he tells Ned

³³ In "Sonata in X", self-confrontation is symbolized by the image of the mirror, which recurs throughout Thomas's work. For an in-depth treatment of mirror imagery in the poet's work, see William V. Davis, "Mirrors and Mirror Imagery", *Poetry and Theology* 73-83, and Katie Gramich, "Mirror Games: The Self and M(O)ther in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas", *Echoes to the Amen* 132-148.

³⁴ Thomas makes a clever, if somewhat dark, pun on detachment in "Ap Huw's Testament" (*PS* 29): "My mother gave me the breast's milk / Generously, but grew mean after, / Envyng me my *detached* laughter", italics added.

³⁵ See "Enigma" (*AL* 31): "Or would the cracked lips, parted at last, disclose / The embryonic thought that never grows?"

³⁶ Antiphonal music is especially common in the Anglican tradition, where the choir often divides into two halves, the *Cantoris* and the *Decani*.

Thomas.³⁷ Certainly “the tide’s pendulum truth” inspires alternating phrases, what is called “infinite counterpoint” in the poem. In another sense, however, the division is within the speaker. Thomas is trying to separate from himself (“standing back // from myself”) in order to gain perspective, but that self is *itself* divided, estranged, not whole. The speaker describes himself as “Vertical in my / dimensionless presence”. In physics, “dimensionless” is a term used to describe a physical quantity that is not measurable.³⁸ And yet, measuring is exactly what the speaker is *attempting* to do: to quantify an unknown quantity, to trace a “lonely, uncertain self” back to its origins, even to the womb, to assemble it, give it shape.³⁹ In this sense, self-definition is self-composition, an attempt to examine the multi-faceted self so that the self *becomes* faceted, *has* definition. This is one reason for sight-stanzas, as opposed to closed stanzas. Closed stanzas are very defined, making (and marking) clear divisions and movements between line groupings. They are, in other words, very clearly faceted. As such, they are *too* ordered to be structurally mimetic. In Jason’s terms, they are “purposefully crafted to create a range of special relationships among stanza materials”,⁴⁰ yet for R. S. Thomas, relationships are often unclear or ambiguous, particularly as they represent the formation of self. Sight-stanzas, on the other hand, allow the poet to gesture towards order, to *seek* order, without defining what cannot yet be defined. In the words of “Sonata in X”, “truth” is the poet’s “ability / to hold all things in play”; we might say that Thomas must formally “hold” all things which are structurally, linearly “in play”. To do so makes “bringing beauty to birth” a possibility.

³⁷ “Probing” 46. Thomas is here referring to his musical tastes, but “Sonata in X” is written in multiple voices, and the direct comparison to music is evident from the title.

³⁸ Paul Davies uses the term “dimensionless” repeatedly in *The New Physics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992). For example, he writes, “You can find the log of a dimensionless number unambiguously, but the log of a mass depends on the units in which the mass is measured” (453).

³⁹ Barbara Prys-Williams, *Twentieth Century Autobiography* 147.

⁴⁰ “Stanzas and Anti-Stanzas” 744.

For R. S. Thomas, then, sight-stanzas are a way of seeking order while staying true to the rendering of insecure experience. And it *is* experience that is most important to a discussion of R. S. Thomas's late style since the fragile formal balance we have been discussing mirrors the poet's questioning hold on his own identity. Unity with God and unity with self are, in fact, difficult to separate, equally elusive, and any moments of oneness or wholeness are hard-won and transitory. They are also tenuous, susceptible to surrounding disorder, and Thomas's sight-stanzas reflect this because, again, their open-ended structural order is continually threatened by close association with lines that *resist* order. In this vein, the American poet Charles Wright has said,

Stanzas [seem] to me the proper study of poetkind. Which is to say if the poetry isn't in stanzas, it's all kind of unorganized. *Wrenching order out of chaos* in one of the things we know poetry does.⁴¹

As we discussed in the previous chapter, the poems written at Aberdaron are not "unorganized", but *quasi*-unorganized, and when they are not written in stanzas—as most of the lyrics written at Aberdaron are not—their structure contributes to the apparent disorder. By way of contrast, sight-stanzas formally "[wrench] order out of chaos". But one hastens to add that Thomas is also *using* chaos; that is, his lineation is the mimetic *for* chaos. Geoffrey Hill has written, "In a chaotic society the poet creates his own moral world, his own pattern and order",⁴² and this is what Thomas does with his late form. His linear prosody and his sight-stanzas create a fragile "pattern and order", simultaneously working together *and* resisting each other. Although he (strangely) does not relate the concept to Thomas's style, Morgan points to the poet's "ability to hold things together" and his "crafting between the whole and the parts".⁴³ Clearly there are important structural tensions in Thomas's work between "the whole and the parts"—

⁴¹ "A Conversation With Charles Wright", *The Post-Confessionals: Conversations with American Poets of the Eighties*, eds. Earl G. Ingersoll, Judith Kitchen, and Stan Sanvel Rubin (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1989) 31, italics added.

⁴² "The Poetry of Allen Tate" *Geste* 3 (1958): 11.

⁴³ R. S. Thomas: *Identity, Environment, and Deity* 183-4. Morgan is quoting Esther De Waal's *Celtic Light: A Tradition Rediscovered* (London: Harper Collins, 1997).

between word and line, line and stanza, stanza and poem—and these tensions threaten the poet's "ability to hold things together".⁴⁴ It is a kind of formal balancing act, one that is constantly threatened. To use the poet's words slightly out of context, "Ah // what balance is needed at / the edges of such an abyss" ("Threshold" *BHN* 110).⁴⁵

It is likely that R. S. Thomas was first exposed to visual stanzas, and some of their prosodic possibilities, in the work of American poet William Carlos Williams, who might be called the inventor of the sight-stanza.⁴⁶ While it is difficult to know just how extensive Thomas's *direct* response to Williams may have been (*c.f.* our discussion in Chapter 3 on Thomas's debt to Williams and American poetry), it seems clear from Thomas's comments that Williams was primarily a formal influence, rather than a thematic one.⁴⁷ David Lloyd does find "significant common ground" between the poets, including a shared interest in birds and "experiences intrinsic to vocations ministering to the public: as a physician for Williams, as a priest for Thomas".⁴⁸ And Lloyd's treatment of the poets' responses to painting is persuasive. But "common ground" is not the same thing as influence. R. S. Thomas's interest in birds, for example, is in no way attributable to William Carlos Williams, nor are the "public" poems written at Eglwys-fach influenced by Williams's more rhetorical offerings, such as "Tract" and "Gulls". As

⁴⁴ Ibid. 184. Morgan's assertion is that "[Thomas] is at pains in the poetry as a whole, but in particular in the religious poetry, to express the beauty and wholeness of the world as well its brokenness and division, the redemption of humankind as well as its demise, belonging as well as alienation". This, however, is too strong an assertion. It is far more accurate to say that Thomas is "at pains" to *discover* wholeness, to find it *within* a broken and divided world, and that he is *seeking* "belonging" because his experience has primarily been one of "alienation".

⁴⁵ Thomas's late poetry is often concerned with "balance", and it is a word he also uses in both interviews and in prose. For example, he has spoken plainly of his "struggle to balance off the urgency of [his] need for revelation with the need for patience" ("R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet" 51), and he refers to God as "that Being that keeps it all in balance" (4 145). Thomas, like his God, struggles to "[keep] it all in balance". In this vein, Damian Walford Davies has written that Thomas's "startling conceits [. . .] hold science and belief, technology and humanity, in a paradoxical and disturbing balance" ("The Frequencies I Commanded": Recording R. S. Thomas [With Some Thoughts On Dylan]), *North American Journal of Welsh Studies* 2.1 [2002]: 16).

⁴⁶ For more on Williams and the genesis of the sight-stanza, see Eleanor Berry's insightful essay, "Williams' Development of a New Prosodic Form—Not the 'Variable Foot,' but the 'Sight-Stanza'", *William Carlos Williams Review* 7 (1981): 21–30. Berry also quotes passages from Philip Jason.

⁴⁷ "Probing" 44: "William Carlos Williams was influential in my change of form in certain poems".

⁴⁸ "Making It New: R. S. Thomas and William Carlos Williams" 123.

Lloyd more or less concedes, the poets are more dissimilar than alike. There is, of course, one important exception: their use of form. Indeed, it is *visual* form, especially the sight-stanza, that Thomas apparently gleaned from Williams's work.

It is interesting that R. S. Thomas only uses the sight-stanza in groupings of four lines or less. Longer stanzas, even in the late work, are closed. One reason for this may be that the eye more readily perceives a visual pattern when stanzas are shorter. If a structure made up of sight-stanzas is a graphic representation of order, then the reader must be able to perceive the poem *as* an ordered, visual structure. This is illustrated by the following comparison:

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It is not that the eye fails to see the visual pattern on the right, which clearly groups six lines rather than three, but that it cannot easily “hold” multiple stanzas of this length at one time while engaging with so many flexible, systematically-enjambed lines. This would not matter as much if the stanzas were closed. The white space between each stanza would be a transition, giving one permission to “reset” when moving on to the next series of lines. But as we saw in both “The White Tiger” and “Sonata in X”, sight-stanzas

require us to retain unfinished thoughts and phrases and carry them over white space; indeed, sometimes we must carry them over three stanzas or more, and short stanzas make this possible in a way that longer stanzas do not. Thus, it is visual form *in combination* with lineation that allows Thomas's sight-stanzas to function prosodically. We might invent a term for this, referring to his as a "lineo-spatial" prosody. Clearly a purely visual form would not be adequate. Concrete, or shape poetry would likely negate the effects of linear counterpoint. Thomas's linear prosody would not function, for example, in the shape of Herbert's "Easter Wings". Instead, Thomas's sight-stanzas establish a visual pattern while still allowing words to be read as lineated sentences, or at least parts of sentences. Williams, it is worth pointing out, often negates this aspect of sentence-language, suspending single words in typographic space. When he does this, his prosody shifts from "lineo-spatial" to purely visual.

But these purely visual techniques notwithstanding, William Carlos Williams's poems provide us with any number of examples of the "lineo-spatial" sight-stanza. "The Eyeglasses", from *Spring and All* (1923), begins as follows:

The universality of things
draws me toward the candy
with melon flowers that open

about the edge of refuse
proclaiming without accent
the quality of the farmer's

shoulders and his daughter's
accidental skin, so sweet
with clover and the small

yellow cinquefoil in the
parched places. It is
this that engages the favorable

distortion of eyeglasses
that see everything and remain
related to mathematics—⁴⁹

⁴⁹ William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985) 48.

Eleanor Berry suggests some possible reasons why Williams orders the poem this way. She first suggests that Williams is attempting “to create a sense of order that wins the reader’s patience with material at the apparent chaos of which he might otherwise balk”.⁵⁰ This certainly coincides with what we have decided R. S. Thomas is doing in his late poetry: seeking “a sense of order” for “apparent chaos”. Berry also suggests that “A stanzaic format amounts to an invitation from the writer to give attention to the particulars of language of the text, to regard them as intentional rather than contingent”.⁵¹ As we have discussed at length, Thomas frequently uses systematic-enjambment to disrupt syntax, and to separate parts of speech, thereby “giv[ing] attention to the particulars of language”. But, we have also seen, in both “The White Tiger” and “Sonata in X”, that stanza divisions *can* enhance this separation while simultaneously gesturing toward an order which is “intentional rather than contingent”. Sight-stanzas can, returning to Williams’s passage from “Comedy Entombed”, create a “new” order for “disorder and brokenness”. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that R. S. Thomas’s most sustained attempt to “order” his own experience, *The Echoes Return Slow*, is primarily written in sight-stanzas. In this way, the volume resembles much of the poet’s late work. However, in other, stylistically-significant ways, *The Echoes Return Slow* is unique, quite unlike anything else R. S. Thomas ever penned.

Identity in Performance: *The Echoes Return Slow*

In a dissolving
world what certainties
for the self, whose identity
is its performance?
(ERS 33)

⁵⁰ “Williams’ Development of a New Prosodic Form—*Not* the ‘Variable Foot,’ but the ‘Sight-Stanza’” 25.

⁵¹ Ibid.

When considering R. S. Thomas's *oeuvre*, readers will unavoidably have diverse opinions about which volumes are most (and least) successful. While one does not want to suggest a hierarchy of quality, one does wish to argue that there are two volumes which perhaps stand out as R. S. Thomas's greatest *stylistic* achievements. The first volume, *Frequencies* (1978), is the apex of the poet's skill with linear prosody. It is a convergence of counterpoint, mimesis, contemporary metaphor, and wordplay, and it also marks the full union of the poet's two great searches, into God-space and self-space. It may very well be his *magnum opus*. The second volume, *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988), is R. S. Thomas's most ambitious work, a collection of untitled "cuttings" and "sketches"⁵² in both poetry and prose that approach wholeness by viewing, then re-viewing, developmental experiences, what the poet sees as important moments in the formation of self. As opposed to "the dismantling / by the self of a self it / could not reassemble" ("In Context" F 13), *The Echoes Return Slow* attempts to assemble the self, to trace its development over a lifetime.

The Echoes Return Slow has not, until fairly recently, received much critical attention; however, two important pieces of criticism have recently shed considerable light on both the purpose and method of this distinctive volume. M. Wynn Thomas describes *The Echoes Return Slow* as "spiritual autobiography", demonstrating how R. S. Thomas constructs an image of self through the interplay of poetry and prose. This interplay "[explores] the multi-dimensional character of a self that relates to time in an extremely complex fashion" and does so with a Kierkegaardian awareness that "the spiritual self [exists] only in, and as, a process of self-relating". The autobiography is therefore an unconventional example of the genre because it "address[es] the problem of how to develop a contemporary discourse appropriate for exploring the concept [. . .] of

⁵² See Robert Minhinnick, "Living With R. S. Thomas" 13: "[Thomas's poems] seem cuttings from an invisible main work, sketches for a masterpiece that has disappeared".

the intrinsically spiritual character of the self".⁵³ Barbara Prys-Williams, in her examination of *The Echoes Return Slow*, describes how R. S. Thomas represents himself "at times [as] the detached observer of his banal human story, at times [as] an intensely involved protagonist in a cosmic encounter". He is "the epitome of existential loneliness, [. . .] vulnerably adrift in a bleak, hostile universe", yet he can also, at times, "affirm the power of love as an overwhelming reality". As she examines these and other themes, Prys-Williams concludes that Thomas "sees personality as a constant process of becoming", and that "in translating a myriad transient sensations into specific powerful images, Thomas is arriving at very necessary moments of self-definition, fleeting times when he assembles his sense of self most completely".⁵⁴ Both critics are therefore aware that *The Echoes Return Slow* is a multi-faceted exercise in self-definition, self-relating, and self-assembly, and that as such, it presents R. S. Thomas with unique psychological and technical challenges. Given the context of our discussion, one wishes to focus on the latter; that is, one wishes to discuss quite what sort of technique Thomas creates.

There is a single stylistic feature of *The Echoes Return Slow* that in and of itself makes the volume a unique point of arrival along Thomas's stylistic journey, the feature which is the most obvious difference in the volume as compared to Thomas's other late volumes, and also the most important. Each lyric poem in *The Echoes Return Slow* immediately follows, and faces on an adjoining page, a prose paragraph.⁵⁵ For the most part, these paragraphs are highly-wrought and imagistic, and they use metaphor, wordplay, and condensed language in much the same manner as the poetry. Indeed, "in some cases it is difficult for a reader to understand in what respect precisely, except for

⁵³ "'Time's Changeling': Autobiography in *The Echoes Return Slow*" 184; 185; 187.

⁵⁴ "Buried To Be Dug Up", *Twentieth Century Autobiography* 122; 124; 135.

⁵⁵ This, unfortunately, is not the case in the Bloodaxe *Collected Later Poems: 1988-2000* (2004), which ignores this pattern and in so doing negates the very important interplay between prose and poetry.

the style of its layout, the prose discourse differs from the poetic discourse".⁵⁶ And yet, as simple as it may sound, the layout of the prose *is* its most important property.

A characteristic feature of prose as compared to poetry (some would say the *defining* feature), is that it is not divided into lines. In and of itself, this feature provides *The Echoes Return Slow* with a stability that is largely absent in the late poetry. The poet seeks oneness, with God and with self, but systematically-enjambed lines of poetry resist (self-)harmony by shifting and refusing order. Slight-stanzas, which are used in a majority of poems in *The Echoes Return Slow*, are a gesture toward order, but as we have observed, they are not defined in the same way closed stanzas are. This begs obvious questions: Why does Thomas not write exclusively in closed stanzas? Why not employ syntax verse, or even rhyme and metre? Why not stabilize the poetic forms themselves? The answer is likely thus: by the time R. S. Thomas composed *The Echoes Return Slow*, his linear prosody had long since become synonymous with the very acts of thinking, feeling, searching, praying. He could not divorce himself from these and stay true to experience any more than he could change the reality of that experience by altering his form. As M. Wynn Thomas comments, "Thomas needs faithfully to render the temporal conditions that, paradoxically, provide the spiritual self with the very terms of its existence",⁵⁷ and this is nowhere more evident than in the structure of his poetry. His prosody is a faithful rendering of his experience, and of himself. "In a dissolving / world [. . .] identity / *is* its performance" (*ERS* 33, italics added). As we discussed at length in Chapter 3, the prosody of a free verse poet is a persona. For Thomas, this persona has grown more, not less, unstable over time. If we view his late prosody as a mirror, a reflection of himself—and we should—then these lines take on new meaning:

⁵⁶ M. Wynn Thomas, "Time's Changeling" 183.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 188.

Its camera
is an X-ray. It is a chalice

held out to you in
silent communion, where graspingly
you partake of a shifting
identity never your own.

("Reflections" NTF 31)

Unlike the poetry, the prose paragraphs in *The Echoes Return Slow* do not shift. They do not cut against syntax or readjust their meanings continually. Each is a stabilizing counterpoint to its corresponding poem. Two poems side by side, each of them rich with ambiguity and multiple meanings, would not stabilize each other in the same way. This does not mean that the prose *expresses* stability any more than the poetry does; rather, the genre is itself more stable, and it can give dimension to a speaker who is often a "dimensionless presence" ("Sonata in X" MHT 81). We can expand slightly on our earlier mathematical formula of " $X = \text{self}$ " by making that X the intersection of poetry (A) and prose (B). In mathematical terms, X is an element of $A \cap B$ if, and only if, X is an element of A and X is an element of B . By addressing the same experience, event, or view of the self in two genres, the intersection of those genres, in turn, gives dimension to the experience, event, or view of the self. None of the poems or prose paragraphs is titled. None of them is dated. Each might slip into the "dissolving world" were it not for its corresponding counterpoint.

In *The Echoes Return Slow*, the prose passages always appear on the left page, the poems on the right. If we take it as a given that the volume's pages are meant to be read in order, and there is no reason to think that they are not, then the arrangement suggests that we should read the prose first, followed by the poetry. This also means that the prose will be in our mind as we read the poem; in this sense, the prose acts as a lens, an angle of vision through which we view the poem:

Not from conceit certainly, yet he could not escape from his looking glass. There it was the concealed likeness, always ahead in its ambush. Imagining the first human, he conceived his astonishment in finding himself face to face with the unknown denizen of water. With the refinement of the mirror there occurred only the refinement of his dilemma.

(ERS 108)

The poet scans the stars
and the scientist his equations.
Life, how often must I
be brought to confront

my image in an oblique
glass? The spirit revolves
on itself and is without
shadow, but behind

the mirror is the twin helix
where the chromosomes
pass one another back
to back to a tune from the abyss.

(ERS 109)

When we read the above prose paragraph, which is in third person,⁵⁸ we read of a man who cannot stop looking at his reflection. The phrase “cannot escape” suggests that he has no choice. Is he a narcissist, we wonder?⁵⁹ Or is he looking merely to catch a glimpse of an elusive, “concealed likeness”? Yet the opposite also seems true, that his likeness is waiting to catch *him*. Just how the speaker’s (or narrator’s, since this is prose) likeness might “ambush” him is unclear, but there is an element of trepidation on the part of the man, a fear of seeing the very thing he is searching for. This inspires a vision of the first human, an Adam-figure who sees his own reflection yet thinks it is another being, an “unknown denizen of water”. The word “denizen” can denote either an inhabitant *or* an alien living in a foreign land. Both of these seem valid here. The paragraph ends with two kinds of “refinement”: of mirror and dilemma. Just how can a mirror be refined? One notes that this section of *The Echoes Return Slow* corresponds to the first years of Thomas’s retirement at Sarn-y-Plas. Having retired from the ministry, the poet did not

⁵⁸ The prose in *The Echoes Return Slow* is in third person, and while, like the poetry, it is written in condensed language, it is also more abstract, more narrational than the poetry, which is more immediate. Thus, the poetry very often *enacts* what is being talked about in the prose, which provides a context for the private drama.

⁵⁹ Katie Gramich’s suggestion, that at times, the Narcissus of Thomas’s poetry “is obsessed not so much with the beauty of his own image as with what is going on behind that image”, is relevant in this context. It is also relevant to the corresponding poem, and the DNA which is behind, rather than inside, the mirror (“Self and M(O)ther in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas” 142).

fill his days with vocational work, and this left increased time for introspection. In a subsequent prose passage (ERS 112), he writes, “The problems he had concealed from his congregation had him now all to themselves”. Perhaps, then, the “refinement” is increased introspection, which allows a longer, closer look at the self. In this sense, the refined mirror of introspection only leads Thomas to a further realization of his ambiguity. The more he looks at himself, the more he realizes he simply does not know who he is.

Our interpretation of the prose passage is carried with us as we read the corresponding poem, which we note is in first person rather than third. This makes the voice more immediate, perhaps more akin to the man looking in the mirror than to his distanced reflection. The poem opens with a reference to science: “The poet scans the stars / and the scientist his equations”. Because we read these lines in the light of the prose passage, we wonder, is the poet scanning the stars the same man who stares into the mirror? Are the stars, then, a kind of mirror? Are equations a kind of mirror for the scientist? The next lines answer our question: “Life, how often must I / be brought to confront // my image in an oblique / glass?” Without the prose passage, we might consider the opening lines as separate from the mirror, but in fact the “oblique glass” is both the stars and the equations. Thus the speaker can speak of the spirit “revolv[ing] / on itself” as if it were a planet, and he can speak of DNA, which is also a mirror, a “twin helix” [. . .] back / to back”, all in the context of his reflection. Of course, in the dynamic poem, Thomas’s lineation can create meanings, and point out certain words, in a manner that the prose cannot. For example, the break between sight-stanzas, “confront // my image”, magnifies the effect of the line break, underscoring the poet’s impatience and distaste at confronting his own image. This also suggests that he wants to confront the image of another. But whose? The “oblique glass” is an allusion to 1 Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but

then shall I know even as also I am known". The scriptural promise is that one day the glass between man and God will not be "dark". It will not be "oblique". We will see God "face to face" ("Face to face? Ah, no / God; such language falsifies / the relation" ["Waiting" F 32]). The speaker is thus, ultimately, asking how long he must wait for this promise to be realized, to know himself and to know God. And what we begin to notice is that not only does the prose influence the way we read the facing poem, but that the poem causes us to re-envision, to re-evaluate, the prose in much the same way that a line of Thomas's poetry will often ask us to reinterpret the preceding line. Is the "concealed likeness", we now wonder, the hidden God? Certainly Thomas's God hides; he even waits in ambush at times. Does the trepidation, then, come from the poet's fear of God as much as himself? Is the paragraph in third person in order to distance the deity? This brings us back to a point we have made previously but which bears repeating: Thomas's quest for God and his quest for self are one and the same. Fear of one is fear of the other. Oneness with God is wholeness of self.

Because of the interplay of poetry and prose, we are able to arrive at a kind of unity. This is not a unity of self, but rather a unity of *meaning*. The poet has not yet achieved spiritual wholeness, but neither is he "dimensionless". If "identity / is its performance", then any performance that leads to understanding is part of self-awareness, even if it requires uncertainty (negative capability again). As Prys-Williams so aptly observes, *The Echoes Return Slow* is a way for Thomas "to explore and understand himself", and in writing it, he "has fashioned an artefact that *represents a unique identity* which can reflect back to the lonely, uncertain self some sense of who he is".⁶⁰ In doing this, R. S. Thomas has composed what is without a doubt his most wholly original stylistic achievement.

⁶⁰ *Twentieth Century Biography* 147, italics added.

We see that Thomas never ceases to experiment, to seek new forms as he searches for wholeness. Because of this, both the poet and the poems are experimental, the act being as important to him as the product. Indeed, we might say that R. S. Thomas's late poems are both an attempt to create wholeness (an action) and the place where wholeness is sought (a setting for action). In the words of Wallace Stevens, whose work Thomas read religiously,⁶¹ "the poem of the mind" is both "the act of finding / What will suffice" and "the theatre" where the modern poet must "construct a new stage".⁶² Stevens believed that the modern poet could approach unity through the imagination, which could order, and reorder, the world around it. But, like R. S. Thomas, he believed that the voice of the modern poet must also be in tune with the realities of the modern world: "It has to face the men of the time and to meet / The women of the time. It has to think about war / And it has to find what will suffice". In other words, unity must be sought *within* the modern world, not as an escape from it:

It has to be on that stage,
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one.⁶³

This idea of "becoming one", of becoming whole not merely by writing a poem, but by seeking for the unity which the poem reflects, is the warp and woof of R. S. Thomas's late work, and to a large extent his work as a whole. This vision of wholeness eventually emerges most vividly and most movingly as the imagined Abercuawg, the place for the

⁶¹ Thomas speaks religiously of Stevens in "Homage to Wallace Stevens" (NTF 62): "I turn now / not to the Bible / but to Wallace Stevens. [. . .] Blessings, Stevens; / I stand with my back to grammar / at an altar you never aspired / to, celebrating the sacrament / of the imagination whose high priest / notwithstanding you are". For more on Thomas's response to Stevens, see Tony Brown's "'Blessings, Stevens': R. S. Thomas and Wallace Stevens", *Echoes to the Amen* 112-131.

⁶² "Of Modern Poetry", *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954) 239.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

displaced self, the manifestation of the internalized, imaginative dream. Abercuawg is not a tangible location any more than God or self is tangible, but neither is it a fiction:

This is man's estate. He is always on the verge of comprehending God, but insomuch as he is a mortal creature, he never will. Nor will he ever see Abercuawg. But through striving to see it, through longing for it, through refusing to accept that it belongs to the past and has fallen into oblivion; through refusing to accept some second-hand substitute, he will succeed in preserving it as an eternal possibility.

(*Abercuawg* SP 55)

R. S. Thomas's stylistic journey, like his spiritual journey, is one of longing: for sound, for shape, for a structure and style that can reflect the reality of an experience which is often fragmented and disparate while simultaneously "preserving [. . .] eternal possibility". It is, in fact, *through* longing and searching that Thomas sees beyond the broken and occasionally realizes "central peace". Shepherd does not relate the following comments to R. S. Thomas's style, but they are nevertheless an ideal description of the poet's unrelenting, moment-to-moment, poem-by-poem, search for "unity of being" (SP 143), a search that carefully, even painstakingly, reveals an "identity in performance":

Whereas speech is linear, a series of consecutive moments articulated in time, the moment of passive union is not consecutive. *It refuses fragmentation*".⁶⁴

⁶⁴ *Conceding an Absence* 187-88, italics added.

Conclusion

In a 1993 Editorial in *Poetry Wales*, Richard Poole writes that “R. S. Thomas seems always to have kept at least one step ahead of his readers”.¹ And so he did. Much like the electron-God of his late poetry, Thomas had already set off by the time his readers, and his critics, arrived. In terms of an enlightening discussion of his style, relatively few critics have arrived at all. In 2003, Damian Walford Davies suggested that “a ‘second generation’ R. S. Thomas criticism should in the decade after the poet’s death strive to see an iconic Thomas anew and seek to *defamiliarize* its subject”.² To Davies’s refreshing suggestion, one might add a prerequisite need for criticism to *familiarize* itself with Thomas’s style, which is fundamental to the way the poems are (or should be) read. In order to see R. S. Thomas afresh, critics must get away from merely viewing R. S. Thomas as poet of the bald Welsh hills, or as the dark seeker of a God who refuses to talk. They must even—a much smaller number—get away from seeing him only as the seeker of “an horizon / beyond the horizon”³ and look, as this thesis has attempted to look, at how, as a poet—not a political figure or Welsh culture hero—he does this, the very techniques he uses. We have scarcely begun to measure Thomas’s accomplishments as an artist who not only applied the known techniques of his poetic calling, but who also unceasingly sought out new ones. His was a journey that began in imitation and quickly led to innovation. His evolving prosodies—metrical, accentual, linear, and visual—were shaped by, and were a reflection of, his experience. Never willing to be boxed-in by critics or conventions, always willing to seek out, and experiment with, new methods for *relating* that experience, R. S. Thomas—often caricatured as a backwater, anti-progress, Welsh recluse—may in fact be the most *avant-garde*, progressive poet of his generation. It is bewildering that no one has previously made a sustained attempt to analyze and

¹ “R. S. Thomas at Eighty”, *Poetry Wales* 29.1 (1993): 2.

² *Echoes to the Amen* 5-6.

³ From “A Life” (EA 52).

evaluate the intricacies of his craft. The present thesis, the first such attempt, is only a beginning. There is more, a good deal more, that needs saying. The poetic path to each of Thomas's stylistic destinations is layered and nuanced and varied, and we have much to do if we are to catch up to a poetry that, eight years after the poet's death, still seems ahead of its time. Indeed, it is J. Meek-Davies, writing in the *Western Mail*, who offers what is perhaps the most fitting appraisal of R. S. Thomas's stylistic achievement: "the author in death still manages to outpace us".⁴

⁴ "Even in death this author can still outpace us", *Western Mail* 2 Sept. 2002, 16.

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