

# Introduction

## Overview

The themes of identity, environment, and deity treated in this book reflect the major preoccupations of R. S. Thomas's life and work. My intention in the book has been to set out a detailed and comprehensive examination of these major themes as they occur across Thomas's substantial oeuvre, while at the same time providing an expanded frame within which the considerable complexity of Thomas's work can be more profitably explored. However, I want to stress throughout the book that these 'categories', while necessary to a practical exploration of the subtlety and interrelation of Thomas's work as a whole, are, ultimately, heuristic constructs. Like the individual poems, the 'categories' explored here are never strictly divisive or exclusive but, rather, fluid, very often reflecting, expanding, and qualifying one another. Thomas's search for identity cannot be divorced from his theological probings. His reflections on nature and science are equally the important settings and occasions for these 'other' questions of identity and deity. Thus, Thomas's work, viewed as a whole, forms a highly wrought mosaic. In its radical adherence to the truth of experienced life, both exterior and interior, it depicts an intricate, intimate, and ultimately inextricable reciprocity and tension across these broader categories. Finally, in each of the 'categories' examined, I have argued that Thomas's poetry is uniquely expansive in its effect, broadening each category intellectually while simultaneously relating all three to one another, making the oeuvre an organic whole with a life greater than the sum of its parts. This effect is what Thomas, quoting Wallace Stevens's 'Chocorua to Its Neighbor', refers to as 'acutest speech', the creation of a poetry of being, a speaking 'humanly from the height or from the depth / Of human things' (Stevens 1955: 300). It is this quality of 'acutest speech' in Thomas's work which I want to suggest, in the end, is the force which underpins its 'categories' and the deepening complexity and paradox explored within those categories, and which raises it, finally, to stand among the finest English poetry of the twentieth century.

Chapters 1 and 2 of the book argue that underpinning Thomas's oeuvre is a 'project' in autobiography which is rooted in the question of

the poet's own elusive identities. I want to suggest that such poetic explorations and revelations of identity provide the *prima materia* of the poetry and form an underlying foundation to Thomas's poetry viewed as a single body of work. I will also suggest that, over the course of his many collections, a gradual development can be seen in Thomas's approach to this 'project' in autobiography, from a strenuous interior exploration of 'lost' or 'wounded' selves, towards a deepening philosophical acceptance and what he calls 'turning aside'.

Chapter 3 explores Thomas's treatment of the natural world, in particular the theology of nature mysticism vital to much of his work. I will argue for the importance of the natural world not only as revelatory for Thomas but also as distinctly violent and discompassionate, a paradox central to his understanding and his poetry.

Chapters 4 and 5 look closely at Thomas's increasing preoccupation with science: his long-standing philosophical concern with a scientific register for poetry, his own increasing experimentation with that register, his subtle ambivalence with regard to applied technology, his ongoing critique of 'the machine', and his view of modern physics as a branch of pure science potentially reconstructive in its employment of imagination and intuition. Although the significance of these topics is generally recognised by critics, that significance has, as yet, received scant detailed attention. My treatment in this chapter is aimed to reveal an often-underestimated intellectual breadth and sophistication in Thomas's philosophical grounding and poetic experimentation.

Finally, Chapters 6 and 7 examine Thomas's 'religious poetry'. I will look not only at the more exact nature of his re-configuring of Christian theology through a close consideration of his collections *H'm* (1972), *Frequencies* (1978), and *Destinations* (1985) but equally at his radical expansion of the category 'religious poetry', and at what he sees as the function of that poetry. My aim here is to *expand* discussion of Thomas by re-focusing more sharply on the exact nature of his poetic approach to a 'theology of experience' as reflected in his 'mythic' and '*via negativa*' modes. It is also my aim to highlight, again, the considerable intellectual breadth and sophistication of Thomas's thought and work in this regard. In addition to this expansion and re-focusing, however, I will argue, in concluding Chapter 7, for a movement in the general emphasis of Thomas's later 'religious poetry' away from the predominating experience of spiritual absence, fragmentation, and despair, towards, increasingly, apprehensions of presence, unity, and hope. I will suggest in the final section of the chapter not only the definite existence of a shift in this direction, but also that Thomas's 1985

collection *Destinations* represents the most concentrated expression of that shift, an expression which can be seen as emerging intermittently prior to *Destinations*, but which is most concentrated *within* the collection, and which continues to make itself felt throughout Thomas's later poetry to his final collection *No Truce with the Furies* (1995).

Of course this book is not intended to be exhaustive. At a time when R. S. Thomas is becoming widely recognised as among the finest poets and most penetrating thinkers of the twentieth century, rich seams in his work remain to be more thoroughly explored. Among these are the Prytherch cycle, the 'portrait-poems', the painting-poems, the love lyrics and, not least, his consistently surprising and powerful employment of metaphor. What I *have* intended is to bring Thomas's most important preoccupations into sharper focus, to deepen and broaden discussion of his large body of work, and to update and expand critical awareness of his significant achievements.

### 'Biculturalty' and 'the wound' as source

Considering not only the sheer size of Thomas's twenty-seven-volume oeuvre but also its sustained vigour, urgency, and often angst, it is important to establish, briefly, the possible sources which underlie such a prodigious poetic energy. In addition to further highlighting the links underlying the categories of self, nature, science, and God, an examination of 'source' can serve both to ground an understanding of Thomas's work in the personal and simultaneously to provide access to a wider understanding of that work as reaching beyond the personal, as defeating a solipsistic isolation, and as becoming potentially representative in its wider significance.

In a 1990 interview for *Planet* magazine entitled 'Probing's' Thomas remarks: 'I complained once to Saunders [Lewis] about the tension of writing in one language and wanting to speak another and his reply was that out of such tensions art was born' (35). The tension which Thomas complains of in this quotation between 'writing in one language and wanting to speak another' is more far-reaching and fundamental than the passing nature of his remark might at first indicate. As Lewis's reply indicates, the question of language for Thomas was and is not merely the utilitarian consideration of an appropriate medium for communication but the significantly deeper and ultimately more important question of personal *identity*. As Thomas knew, Saunders Lewis was able to answer that question by devoting his considerable energies and talents to the continued development of the

specifically Welsh-language culture which formed him. He simultaneously existed and expressed himself from a position wholly within the linguistic parameters of such a culture and ultimately became its leading proponent. By contrast, Thomas's reported 'complaint' to Lewis indicates a painful awareness of his own strenuous existence *between* two cultures – the anglicised culture of his upbringing, education, and profession as priest and poet, and the Welsh-language culture to which he, as a young man, aspires, but outside of which he ultimately feels himself to exist. Lewis's reply to Thomas's complaint indicates the older writer's sensitive understanding of, and sympathy for, Thomas's existence between these two cultures and, most importantly, his reply neither denies the existence of such tension in Thomas nor encourages any strenuous resolution towards one or the other cultural-linguistic pole. Instead, Lewis affirms in Thomas the tension itself as the vital source of art. What I am suggesting here, and throughout the chapters that follow, is that this reply by Lewis proves, in retrospect, to have been of singular vital importance to the young Thomas by pointing to the source and method of his future life's work. Thomas's poetry can be viewed as an ongoing excavation of that tension of 'inbetweenness', most often not as a reaching after resolution but as an embracing and straddling of the frequently dire tensions of a divided identity, an exploration of 'woundedness', what he refers to in the poem 'Petition' from *H'm* (1972) as 'Seeking the poem / In the pain' or, in 'The Porch' from *Frequencies* (1978), as keeping his place 'on that lean / threshold, neither outside nor in' (2, 10). Indeed, despite his hard-won Welsh-language fluency, and later what some have seen as his inheritance of cultural leadership from Saunders Lewis, Thomas referred to what he felt was his necessary restriction to English-language poetic composition as 'the scar on my personality', a comment which, in its graphic metaphorical power, indicates not only the existence of such a wound but equally its depth and visible aftermath (*South Bank Show*, 1991). Indeed, that aftermath is apparent even as late as Thomas's 1995 collection *No Truce with the Furies* in which he writes, in the poem 'Reflections', of the mirror as

a chalice

held out to you in  
 silent communion, where graspingly  
 you partake of a shifting  
 identity never your own. (31)

In these lines, as across the oeuvre as a whole, the scrutiny of self becomes a primary and even sacred poetic act for Thomas, but one resulting characteristically in the uncomfortable perception or experience of a shifting identity.

While this ‘inbetweenness’ or ‘wounding’ in Thomas may be the result primarily of a linguistic, and therefore cultural, exclusion, a wide variety of additional tensions can be seen as contributory. It is possible that Lewis was himself somehow aware of this deeper complexity, stating in his reply to Thomas not that out of *this one linguistic tension* but that ‘out of *such tensions*’ (my italics) art is born. A plurality of tensions come into play here and include, for example, a political yearning by Thomas for a predominantly agricultural, pre-industrialised, independent Welsh nation, as against the factual weight of a history which has often eroded the possibility of either linguistic or political autonomy. There is, as well, the matter of Thomas as a priest of the Church in Wales, an Anglican vicar ministering amongst a native community traditionally non conformist.

Beneath the surface of these more obvious linguistic, political, and religious hauntings are still other tensions, less overt, more obscure and even obscured, but none the less central and potent. For example, the first prose-poem from his autobiographical collection *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988) describes, in a shocking way, what Thomas, at that time past seventy years old, imagines to have been the experience of his caesarean birth. It is not primarily his mother who is ‘wounded’ in the operation but, rather, in a fundamental way, the infant poet is ‘marked out’ for life as a creature doomed to suffer and search:

Pain’s climate. The weather unstable. Blood rather than rain fell.  
The woman was opened and sewed up, relieved of the trash that  
had accumulated nine months in the man’s absence. Time would  
have its work cut out in smoothing the birth-marks in the flesh. The  
marks in the spirit would not heal. The dream would recur, grop-  
ing his way up to the light, coming to the crack too narrow to  
squeeze through. (2)

The quotation places a finger squarely on the pulse of Thomas’s poetic sources: emotional pain; a perception of the self as insubstantial and devalued or ‘trash’; spiritual wounding; the dream of healing, of a unity and wholeness to be regained; grief over loss; anxiety at the inability to ‘squeeze through’, to belong wholly to one world or another.<sup>1</sup> If the poem reveals a generalised view of existence as primarily a matter of unrelied pain and anxiety, other poems by Thomas such as, for example,

‘Ap Huw’s Testament’, ‘Welsh’, ‘The Boy’s Tale’, ‘In Memory’, ‘Album’, ‘Salt’, ‘Roles’, and even certain prose remarks, indicate, in a much more specific, though still at times veiled way, the sources of such pain to be rooted equally in the young Thomas’s early experiences of family relationship. There are suggestions by the poet of a needy and oppressive mother, of an absent and later distant father, of the sense of that father’s independent masculinity being brought ultimately to bay by a dominant matriarchy, and, as a part and direct consequence of all this, of the sensitive and inward boy’s own significant bewilderment to the point of wounding.

Although this book is not an attempt at biography, I do want to suggest that Thomas’s life-experience, as he repeatedly expresses it in his work, seems to revolve significantly around painfully complex issues of identity and belonging that can be traced to a multiplicity of causes, and that such interior divisions are, indeed, as Saunders Lewis suggests, the powerful wellsprings not only of difficulty and suffering but, potentially, of construction and art. The themes treated here are, as we shall see, on various levels and in different ways, all similarly grounded by and shot through with the fact of that multiply fragmented experience, the pain entailed in its necessary confrontation, and the recurrent, although often frustrated, dream of its healing. Thomas himself seems to accept this view of fragmentation, inbetweenness, wounding, and its attendant suffering as the ultimate source of his work by his identification with Kierkegaard’s description of the poet, with which the Danish philosopher opens his *Either/Or*:

What is a poet? An unhappy man who hides deep anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so formed that when the sigh and cry pass through them, it sounds like lovely music. His fate is like that of those unfortunates who were slowly tortured by a gentle fire in Phalaris’s bull; their cries could not reach the tyrant’s ears to cause him dismay, to him they sounded like sweet music. And people flock around the poet and say: ‘Sing again soon’ – that is, ‘May new sufferings torment your soul but your lips be fashioned as before, for the cry would only frighten us, but the music, that is blissful.’  
(43)

Thomas cites a portion of this description in his 1978 article for *Planet* entitled ‘The Creative Writer’s Suicide’ where he discusses ‘the question of pressure on the creative writer, pressure which has been experienced down the centuries’ (178). What Kierkegaard, and Thomas in turn, seems to be suggesting is that the poet by his or her very nature must

suffer, and furthermore that such suffering is the most important source of art, that the poet's natural function is and always has been to transpose emotion into the substance of 'lovely music'.<sup>2</sup> The poet's lot is 'deep anguish', 'slow torture', 'gentle fire', but because the poet's 'lips are so formed', the experience of such pain is to be heard only as 'blissful song'. Indeed, Thomas asks in the poem 'Probing' from his 1975 collection *Laboratories of the Spirit*:

Where are the instruments  
of your music, the pipe of hazel, the  
bull's horn, the interpreters  
of your loneliness on this  
ferocious planet? (23)

These lines indicate what Thomas, like Kierkegaard, sees as the singularity of the poet: his or her peculiar designation in and isolation from the wider world. The interpretation of that loneliness through music or poetry becomes the special province of the poet. But while Kierkegaard and Thomas may share this view of the poet as a kind of wounded singer, it should be noted too that both men suggest a simultaneous exploration and veiling of personal suffering. Kierkegaard, in the quotation above, writes of the poet as 'an unhappy man who *bides* deep anguish in his heart' (my italics). Similarly, J. P. Ward, in his book *R. S. Thomas* (1987), writes that the poetry often 'indicates a strong character covering a deep hurt' (8). Thomas himself seems to confirm that suggestion, writing in 'To a Young Poet' from the 1963 collection *The Bread of Truth* that 'From forty on ... time fosters / A new impulse to conceal your wounds' (11). Although poetic explorations of woundedness are central to Thomas's work, there is a sense in which the more exact sources of that pain do become consciously obscured by the poet. Thomas, like Kierkegaard's poet, opens his mouth, and the sound which issues forth is the transposition of anguish into song. But there is an added subtlety and nuance to the song as its more particular origins are blurred over, as, for example, in the above quotation from *The Echoes Return Slow*. The reader experiences not so much a clear vision along revealed lines, as in some 'confessional' verse, but the sensation of a leashed, subterranean grief, its continually rising pressure, a simultaneous capping of that pressure, and, as a result, a tightly controlled poetic atmosphere often electric with plangency. Thomas repeatedly exhibits a kind of dual compulsion toward the exploration and masking of wounds, towards a kind of nakedness and vulnerability on the one hand and towards armour and concealment on the other.

Some of Thomas's most powerful poems indulge both tendencies, revealing an often warm and delicate humanity at the centre of more strenuous exteriors. Thomas declares, for example, in 'Evening' from *No Truce with the Furies* (1995):

Let us stand, then, in the interval  
of our wounding, till the silence  
turn golden and love is  
a moment eternally overflowing. (19)

We find in these lines the narrator's reaching out in simple acknowledgement and acceptance of his own individual pain as somehow representative of a wider, universal pain. The lines are 'confessional' not by any meticulous tracing to exact personal sources but by their branching beyond the ego to touch a wider, human experience.

This brings me to my final point in this introduction, which is that Thomas's intense, if veiled, scrutiny of his own inbetweenness does not, paradoxically, narrow or parochialise his relevance but, on the contrary, ultimately broadens it. Anthony Thwaite, in his 'Introduction' to a selection of Thomas's work, calls the poems 'an embodiment of Robert Frost's dictum: "You can't be universal without being provincial"' (1996: ix). I want to suggest that R. S. Thomas's 'provincialism' – that is his close, intimate, even at times microscopic attention to and scrutiny of his own immediate localities, both exterior and interior – ultimately branches into a broader relevance, the reason for this being not only the depth of his poetic or philosophical probings, the pressing ever farther and deeper in a quest for understanding and meaning but, equally and in conjunction with this drive, the relentless demand by Thomas for the real, the actual, for poetic renderings which reflect the truths of physical and spiritual experience. Together these compulsions discover a shared human ground which ultimately transcends the personal. These requirements often confront and even explode Thomas's own romantic penchant for ideal states of being. But my point here is that such demands, for meaning and for truth, according to their urgency for Thomas, effectively broaden his most private explorations into wider representations. Thomas becomes not only a Welsh poet writing in English from the edge of Western Europe, but a poet who, by way of pursuing and exploring these 'fated particulars', has, paradoxically, broadened or even mythologised them into a wider human context and connection. In his poem 'The Word' from *Laboratories of the Spirit* (1975) Thomas writes:

A pen appeared, and the god said:  
 'Write what it is to be  
 man.' And my hand hovered  
 long over the bare page,  
 until there, like footprints  
 of the lost traveller, letters  
 took shape on the page's  
 blankness. (3)

According to these lines Thomas's poetic project involves not only what he elsewhere calls the 'illumination of the self', but, according to that illumination, also 'what it is to be / man' (*Echoes*, 1988: 103).

In terms of criticism of Thomas's work this has not always been the predominant view. W. Moelwyn Merchant acknowledges that, concerning Thomas's poems, 'They have appeared to many readers and critics to have a direct, even disarming simplicity and to compass a very limited and readily available range of themes' (1990. 1). More recent and notorious is Ian Gregson's 1994 article for *New Welsh Review* entitled 'An Exhausted Tradition' in which he implies that Thomas's work is lacking in 'its alertness to issues currently concerning Western culture in general' and in which he argues that Thomas and Seamus Heaney are both 'products of comparatively static rural cultures whose preoccupations are largely irrelevant to anyone brought up with television' (23, 22). In contrast to Gregson and others, and central to my overall argument in the chapters which follow, is my contention that the poetry of R. S. Thomas is in fact *distinctly* alert 'to issues currently concerning Western culture' and that, as such, it is uniquely relevant; that his preoccupations, the most important of which I will take up in these pages, are significantly more complex and sophisticated than is often acknowledged, reflecting not only a quite cosmopolitan multiplicity of classical and contemporary sources and influences but also some of the major preoccupations of a post-industrial West.

Finally, in his 1990 interview for *Planet* magazine which I have already referred to, Thomas defines poetry as 'the communication of thought and emotion at the highest and most articulate level. It is the supreme human statement' (1990b: 40). He then refers to Wallace Stevens's 'Chocorua to Its Neighbor' and quotes the following lines from section XIX:

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

It is precisely Stevens's idea of 'acutest speech' as speaking humanly from the heights and depths of human things which ultimately underpins R. S. Thomas's oeuvre, and therefore also the various subjects and arguments which I present in the following chapters. What I have undertaken in this book is a closer and fuller examination of Thomas's most important themes in order to disseminate and highlight not only the significant intellectual breadth and linguistic sophistication of his work but also its 'acutest speech', its speaking humanly from the height and depth of human things which effectively expands its parameters from a poetry highly individual, local, and in time, to a poetry more widely human, representative, outside of time and yet *for* time. It is, I think, primarily this quality of acutest speech in Thomas's poetry which elicits Ted Hughes's tribute to Thomas's *Collected Poems 1945–1990*: 'Lorca said: "The poem that pierces the heart like a knife has yet to be written". But has anybody come closer to it than R. S. Thomas? And not merely once, in his case, but again and again.' It is, in part, with an academic examination of this heartfelt judgement by Hughes that this book is concerned.

### Notes

- 1 Thomas's poem 'The Son' from his 1975 collection *Laboratories of the Spirit* posits a similar pain and grief as befalling his own new born son.
- 2 Dylan Thomas's work would likewise seem to support this idea of 'the wound' as poetic source. In his 'Poem on his Birthday', for example, he describes the poet as one who 'Toils towards the ambush of his wounds', who 'sings towards anguish', and for whom 'Dark is a way and light is a place' (1993: 145–6).