

4 'Lenses to bear': the scientific world

The scientist
brings his lenses to bear and unity
is fragmented. It is the hand saying
it is not of the body, leaving it
to the poet, playing upon his timeless
instrument, to call all things back
into irradiated orbit about the one word.

R. S. Thomas, 'First Person'

Introduction

In his 1985 J. R. Jones Memorial Lecture entitled '*Undod*' or 'Unity' R. S. Thomas describes a historical marriage between religion and science and its gradual disintegration. According to Thomas a philosophical 'unity of being' was first achieved in the West under the influence of the great monotheistic religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Such unity was ultimately undermined by religious reactions by the medieval Christian Church to an emerging scientific vision. Rather than an integration and co-operation developing between thinkers in the two realms, there ensued a continuing divergence, competition, and mutual distrust. Thomas writes:

Some see the Church to blame for trying to stifle scientific research in the Middle Ages. By defending a position which was indefensible, and thus having to give in later on, the Church shook the faith of believers in its teachings. This led, over the centuries, to the freedom and independence accorded the scientist, until, eventually, scientific truth came to be the *only* truth for most of the West's population; and this led, in turn, to people's desertion of the churches. (1988: 30-1)

Thomas goes on to cite reductionism, via Descartes and Darwin, as equally responsible for the continuing fragmentation of this earlier world-view. Descartes he argues, separated matter from spirit and in doing so laid the foundations for a wholly secular investigation of the universe as a kind of inanimate machine:

By creating two parts, matter and spirit, completely separate from each other, Descartes made it possible for the scientist to treat matter as something wholly lifeless, containing innumerable parts, as if it were a vast machine, running on its own. This led in time to a total reductionism, to belief that the whole world was nothing but a machine. (31)

Similarly, Darwin's theory of evolution later exacerbated this reductionism by its assertion of the primacy of man as animal:

Not only was life no more than a collection of hard, material particles; but man was no more than an animal in essence; true, he was a talented animal, with the ability to think and reason, but an animal all the same, born in the same way, possessing the same organs, and dying just like other animals. (31)

In his book *Further Along the Road Less Travelled*, the widely influential American psychiatrist Dr M. Scott Peck, like Thomas, describes a similar historical unity between religion and science, as well as a similar dissolution of that unity. He suggests that philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas were actually scientists, deeply concerned with what today we would call the scientific method, with the logic of premises and viable evidence, but whose realms of inquiry included the divine. According to Peck, this integration of religion and science remained intact until the end of the seventeenth century when, because of growing conflicts between the Church and scientists, not least the indictment of Galileo by the Inquisition in 1633 for his continued adherence to Copernican theory, there developed an 'unwritten social contract' of mutual non-interference in which religion and science agreed to proceed afterward within separate domains. By the eighteenth century 'supernatural knowledge' was said to be the proper concern of religion, and 'natural knowledge' that of science. Peck argues that such an agreement, by substantially easing tensions between the Church and scientists, constituted a significant move towards peace, effectively ushering out the Inquisition, helping to abolish slavery and to establish democracy, and 'giving birth to a technological revolution beyond anybody's wildest expectations, even to the point of paving the way for the development of a planetary culture' (1993: 179). Peck's conclusion, however, is that for our own time such divisions no longer prove beneficial; that in the twentieth century they became so rigidly accentuated as to be compartmentalising and, ultimately, destructive.

What is important here is not merely that Thomas and Peck, leaders in their respective fields and countries, appear to agree on the existence of an historical unity between religion and science and the forces which ultimately destroyed that unity but, rather, that both men find the loss of such unity to be of singular importance to their own age; that both seem to be lamenting the gradual disappearance of a more primitive view in which matter and spirit were one. Even more, both authors seem to imply the possibility that fundamental to humankind is a desire for such unity, the fulfilment of which desire they see as necessary not only to human happiness but possibly even to human survival.

The question remains why Thomas and Peck see such separation as having become destructive. A look at R. S. Thomas's work suggests that an inability to imagine relationships between subject matter, not only between religion and science, may prove detrimental in at least three ways. The first of these is by making artificial and simple a reality that is complex. Compartmentalisation of thought is, for Thomas, a distortion of our experience of an interrelated reality. If strict categories are tempting because less subtle and therefore less painful to handle, they may also constitute an inferior reflection of actual experience. Second, the simplification of a complex reality may, in the end, deny the possibility of paradoxical modes of thought, restraining thought within an either/or framework and effectively barring it from the more imaginative and often higher intellectual realms which typically operate on a model of both/and. For example, as Peck points out, it was Bernhard Riemann, the nineteenth-century German mathematician, who challenged the theory that two parallel lines never meet, and by so doing laid the foundations for the geometry named after him, as well as for much of Einstein's later work (1993: 73–4). Finally, compartmentalisation may, ultimately, invalidate the struggle towards unity and wholeness, intellectual, spiritual, even physical, which Thomas seems to suggest is basic to human existence and the search for meaning. What we can see in the poetry is an ongoing preoccupation with the dangers of such compartmentalisation and a steady pressure towards a reintegration of thought corresponding exactly to these points. The poetry depicts a reality that is complex, interrelated and paradoxical, and it derives its most forceful impetus from a basic struggle towards unity. In particular Thomas's deep concern with science is characterised by a lament over its separation from other areas of thought, from poetry, theology, morals, and by an ongoing struggle to reintegrate these areas, to think, in poetry, of 'supernatural knowledge' in a scientific way, and of 'natural knowledge' in a supernatural way.¹ What seems to prove ultimately destructive in

Thomas's view is not the *desire* for understanding which science poses but the pursuit of that desire divorced from any attention to an innate spiritual searching after wholeness. A. M. Allchin suggests just this in his book *Praise Above All: Discovering the Welsh Tradition*:

No one could pretend that the growth of such [scientific] knowledge has been or is unimportant in the last two centuries. But it is the onesided development of such knowledge at the expense of all other forms of knowing which is one of the principal factors in the crises of meaning and meaninglessness which besets us today. No society can devote its energy and attention exclusively to the question 'how', to the almost total neglect of the question 'why', without suffering mortal consequences. (1991: 74)

It is an overemphasis on the redemption of human beings materially which Thomas sees as potentially catastrophic. In this he is himself a philosopher in the ancient sense of which Peck writes, but presiding over a modern world, over the break-up of older unities of thought, and over what he sees as the increasingly deadly fallout of those divisions. Of course Thomas's position is not simple. For example, he suggests in the poem 'Pre-Cambrian' from *Frequencies* (1978) that scientific inquiry itself may be dangerous, that

Plato, Aristotle,
all those who furrowed the calmness
of their foreheads are responsible
for the bomb. (23)

And yet, as we shall see in Chapter 7, Thomas seems to suggest as well that philosophical or scientific inquiry is one of the paths to spiritual awareness, to renewed awe and spiritual regeneration. He writes, for example, in 'One Life' from *Mass for Hard Times* (1992) that

Growing up
is to leave the fireside
with its tales,
the burying of the head
between God's knees.
It is to perceive
that knowledge of him comes
from the genes' breaking
of an involved code,
from the mind's parallel
at-homeness with missile and scalpel. (56)

Here is just one example of the highly paradoxical nature of Thomas's thought, his rejection and affirmation of science, his acknowledgement of subtlety, complexity, interrelatedness. To recognise this wideness and this relentless drive towards integration in Thomas's work is to acknowledge the size and the difficulty of the poetic task he has set himself, his standing in the stream of scientific and popular progress, perhaps not to turn it back but rather to divert it a little toward integrity and away from what he sees as a dangerous compartmentalisation.

The accusation that Thomas *is* merely one who would 'turn the clock back' has, at times, been popular. In his article 'Confronting the Minotaur: Politics and Poetry in 20th Century Wales' David Smith suggests that R. S. Thomas, among others, is guilty of a 'wilful re-grasping of a lost tradition ..., an ahistorical primitivism ..., a wistful Utopianism that invariably looks and sounds like a holistic past that never existed except in the timeless ante-room of the history mansion' (1979: 9–10, 13). It may be true in reading of Thomas's

long absorption with the plough,
With the tame and the wild creatures
And man united with the earth (*Song* 1955: 115)

that there sometimes comes the temptation to view the poet merely as a country vicar venting his *hiraeth* for the alleged simplicity of a pre-industrialised Wales. In fact, Thomas admits in his autobiography, *No-one*, that

The tendency was always in him to look back and to see the past as superior ... Heavy industry had not [yet] reached south Wales to plunder and deface it, making the nation top-heavy ... R. S. always saw the industrial revolution as Wales's main disaster. (98)

Yet, despite that 'long absorption' and the nostalgia for an earlier age, it must be acknowledged that, if not always affectionately, Thomas is, at the same time, unflinchingly realistic and even forward-looking in his depictions of contemporary life. One thinks, for example, of the poet's declaration in 'Looking at Sheep' from *The Bread of Truth* (1963) :

But images
Like this are for sheer fancy
To play with. Seeing how Wales fares
Now, I will attend rather
To things as they are. (48)

Similarly, Thomas admits in the poem 'Petition' from *H'm* (1972):

One thing I have asked
Of the disposer of the issues
Of life: that truth should defer
To beauty. It was not granted. (2)

In the first instance Thomas echoes somewhat Wallace Stevens's preoccupations with the relation between the imagined and the real in his 'Man with the Blue Guitar'.² The second seems to be a deliberate reworking of Keats's "Beauty is truth, truth beauty". But in both instances the effect is to deflate a romantic idealism in which truth is consistently aesthetically pleasing, in favour of a more strenuous 'seeing' of 'things as they are'. Although Thomas is both nostalgic and romantic in his tapping of history and his vision of an ideal, not to see that tendency in Thomas as working in conjunction with a strenuous realism and constant forward probing effectively denies much of the richness and complexity of his work.

A look at the place of science in that work confirms this dedication to 'things as they are'. Few would disagree that an engagement with modern science, with its vocabulary, sources, and wider implications became increasingly central to the poet's work in later years, even while critical comment on that centrality, and even urgency, has remained sparse. As early as 1968, in the poem 'The Place' from *Not that He Brought Flowers*, Thomas refers to himself as 'a man vowed / To science' (45). In the poem 'Prayer', which closes *Later Poems* (1983), he acknowledges a lifelong dedication to science:

Baudelaire's grave
not too far
from the tree of science.
Mine, too,
since I sought and failed
to steal from it. (214)

Indeed, speaking privately in Manafon as recently as 1998 Thomas remarked on his continuing 'obsession' with science and technology. This chapter examines the source and nature of Thomas's position on science, his path to that position, and, throughout both of these, the rich poetic manifestations of that position. I will also examine Thomas's prose-writing as, in some ways, the clearest articulation of that position on science. By turning to these 'prose sources' one can understand more easily the sometimes hidden lines of continuity which thread these often radically forward-looking poems.¹

Preoccupations and intentions

Ned Thomas's 1992 article for *Planet* entitled 'R. S. Thomas: The Question about Technology' provides a rare and useful point of departure into the subject of science in Thomas's poetry. For example, he makes clear in the article that the poet has long been fascinated by the *language* of science:

From quite early on in his poetry we find words and phrases with a scientific and technical ring to them: 'frost's cruel chemistry', 'time's geometry', 'the embryo music dead in his throat' [and] by the later volumes, terms such as *virus, molecule, cell, gene, frequency, equation* are part of the way he apprehends reality. (1992: 59–60)

He also suggests a certain 'complexity and tension' in the poet's attitude towards science by turning to the poem 'Homo Sapiens 1941' and interpreting the aeroplane at the centre of the poem as 'unambiguously destructive' and depicted in 'words which suggest a mechanical and ruthless purpose', while also indicating that simultaneously in the poem 'there are phrases that invite our admiration, our pride in human achievement even: "hosts of ice ... weigh down his delicate wings" and "daring the starlight above the stiff sea of cloud"(55). Perhaps Ned Thomas's most important insight in the article, however, concerns the separation he implies between R. S. Thomas's acceptance and use of the *language* of science on the one hand and his apparent hostility to the *ideas* which underlie and give rise to that language on the other. He cites the poet's engagement with a scientific vocabulary and, as a somewhat separate issue, considers the 'complexity and tension' he sees in the poet's attitude towards the ideas of science which give rise to that vocabulary. Part of what this chapter suggests is that although Ned Thomas, more than any other critic, has perceptively sown the seeds of a long-neglected inquiry into the importance of science for R. S. Thomas, it remains for those insights to be pursued, both 'backward' to their more explicit source in the prose, and 'forward' to their fuller manifestations in the poems. For example, although he unearths a scientific register in the work of R. S. Thomas and indicates a slight expansion in that register, he neglects to explore the important overall development in that register and the driving force behind it. Similarly, while suggesting a 'complexity and tension' in Thomas's relation to science, he fails to get to grips with the source(s) of that complexity, to reconcile that tension, or to indicate whether these issue from a vague confusion or ambivalence on the part of the poet, or whether they could be the result of a more careful and ongoing investigative process. Perhaps most importantly, Ned Thomas fails to

'deconstruct' the term *science* into its constituent parts or to differentiate it from its natural offspring, 'technology', all of which becomes vital if one is to understand the significant role which science came to play in Thomas's work.

While clearly it is the *ideas* of science which must give rise to its *language*, it is none the less language, diction, actual words which, for R. S. Thomas as a poet, seem to form the starting point in his own preoccupation. What we find in his earliest work is a fairly basic scientific register used infrequently, with a primarily artistic relish, and with little apparent concern for any deeper, associated dilemmas. As we have already seen, Ned Thomas cites 'Lament for Prytherch' from *Song at the Year's Turning* (1955) to indicate Thomas's early use of a scientific diction: 'time's geometry / Upon your face by which we tell / Your sum of years' and, 'Your heart that is dry as a dead leaf / Undone by frost's cruel chemistry' (99). These references to geometry and chemistry, while striking artistically, harbour no deeper judgements on the subjects themselves. This proves true of most of Thomas's early use of a scientific vocabulary. Words such as 'embryonic' (*Stones*, 22), 'gestation' (*Stones*, 23), 'retina' (*Acre*, 33), 'analytic' (*Song*, 97), 'membraned' (*Song*, 111), 'equations' (*Song*, 115), 'lenses' (*Supper*, 27), 'scalpel' (*Supper*, 40), 'litmus' (*Supper*, 42), 'obstetrics' (*Tares*, 10), 'virus' (*Tares*, 11), 'neurosis' (*Tares*, 19), 'nodes' (*Tares*, 36), 'satellites' (*Tares*, 43), 'test-tube' (*Bread*, 7), 'molecules' (*Pieta*, 15), 'voltage' (*Flowers*, 28), 'placenta' (*Flowers*, 33), are almost all used primarily as aesthetic devices, as aids to imagery rather than as indicators of any moral or political position on science itself. However, what begins gradually to emerge, beginning with Thomas's 1972 volume *H'm*, is not only a significant expansion of that register to include a more sophisticated and complex *range* of words but also a simultaneous proliferation in the frequency with which these scientific words are used. This expansion and proliferation are indicative of a deepening philosophical undertow in the poet's work; that from the 1970s onward Thomas's use of the scientific register is characterised by an *escalating irony* as he moves from a younger poet's preoccupation with the mere language of science as a mode of artistic expression to a moral philosopher's anxious concern with the sources and wider implications of those words. For example, Thomas writes in 'No Answer', from the 1972 collection *H'm*:

Knowledge is power;
The old oracle
Has not changed. The nucleus
In the atom awaits
Our bidding. (7)

Not only do ‘nucleus’ and ‘atom’ expand Thomas’s scientific register, raising it to a higher level of sophistication, but clearly the vocabulary is loaded with a new political weight. What began for Thomas with the word emerges here as a deeper awareness of, and struggle with, ideas *behind* the word. Those philosophical struggles with science, and his taking up of a position in relation to it, gradually add to his use of scientific language a distinctive irony, arming the later poems with a moral and political aggression unseen in the earlier work. Without forcing the poems into an artificial framework, it seems one can see a kind of dialectical progress over the course of Thomas’s long preoccupation with science in which the ‘thesis’ of the word as ‘art-object’ is gradually challenged by the ‘antithesis’ of the word as ‘moral signifier’ and, finally, transformed in a ‘synthesis’ of the former two toward an understanding and use of the word as, simultaneously, art-object *and* moral signifier. Of course the aesthetic use of the word is never abandoned by Thomas in this ‘progression’. We might as appropriately speak of a transfiguration of the word as art-object towards a greater potency and militancy of purpose. For example, in the poem ‘Christmas Eve’ from *No Truce with the Furies* (1995) Thomas writes:

Erect capital’s arch;
 decorate it with the gilt edge
 of the moon. Pave the way to it
 with cheques and with credit –
 it is still not high enough
 for the child to pass under
 who comes to us this midnight
 invisible as radiation. (13)

A similarly honed political edge can be felt in the opening lines from ‘Afallon’ in the same collection:

It is Adam’s other
 kingdom, what he might have
 inherited had he
 refused the apple, the nuclear
 fruit with the malignant core. (25)

In both of these examples we can see a dual use of the scientific register both as a contribution to the poem’s aesthetic life and to its stringent irony and underlying political purpose. Such ‘activist intentions’ in Thomas’s poetry are less surprising in light of remarks made in his 1963 W. D. Thomas Memorial Lecture titled ‘Words and the Poet’ where he

makes clear the fact that a political purpose often underlies his work as a poet:

There is always lurking in the back of my poetry a kind of moralistic or propagandist intention. It is as though, having found that I had a slight gift for putting words together to make poems, I used that gift as the best way I knew for getting a particular message across. (1964: 83)

Of equal importance in this regard is Thomas's poem 'After Jericho' from *Frequencies* (1978) in which he writes:

There is an aggression of fact
to be resisted successfully
only in verse, that fights language
with its own tools. (43)

This is precisely the origin of the irony so characteristic of Thomas's later poems concerning science, a fighting of language with its own tools, the juxtaposition or admixture of a scientific register with a more traditional diction as a means of waging battle against what the poet sees as the destructive excesses of a science cordoned off from wider perspectives.

The last section of this chapter takes up Thomas's early position, as he argues it in the prosework, on the theoretical use of scientific language in poetry, turning to the poems themselves to illustrate his practice of that theory. Chapter 5 defines the term 'science', as used by Thomas, by dividing it into realms of 'pure' and 'applied'. It is in this chapter that I will detail the development in Thomas's position on applied science or 'the machine', illustrating how an early balance of ease and trepidation towards applied science gradually gives way to the emergence of a deepening concern and an 'escalating irony' in the later work. Chapter 5 also takes up the two primary sources of Thomas's accumulating critique of applied science and examines the three poetic techniques according to which he achieves this 'escalating irony'. The final section of Chapter 5 looks briefly at a few of the poems in which Thomas envisions the possibility of a Wordsworthian unity between technology and poetry before taking up his position on pure science, in particular modern physics, as he contextualises it in Old Testament theology. Looking primarily at his 1988 article for *Planet* entitled 'Undod' or 'Unity' one discovers a surprising argument in support of pure science as an effective opening to philosophy, as uniquely integrative, and as not only facilitating the highest modes of paradoxical thought but as, for Thomas, a force and method of spiritual regeneration.

The question of language

A curious confusion emerges in the closing to R. S. Thomas's 1963 W. D. Thomas Memorial Lecture, 'Words and the Poet'. First, describing his own poetic ideal he writes:

At times there comes the desire to write with great precision and clarity, words so simple and moving that they bring tears to the eyes, or, if you like, as Wordsworth said, are 'too deep for tears' ... This is where the one syllable, the four letter words come into their own. They can have particular force. One remembers lines such as that by Wilfred Owen in 'Futility': 'Was it for this the clay grew tall?' Plain simple English words, yet so often they are the best. It is a case of 'central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation'. Art is not simple, and yet about so much of the best, whether in painting, poetry or music, there is a kind of miraculous simplicity. Some of Shakespeare's greatest effects are produced with everyday words. There is Lear's 'Take it away; it smells of mortality'; or Cleopatra's 'Do you not see my baby at my breast, that sucks the nurse asleep?' ... I think that as long as there is poetry, it will keep reverting to that native plainness and simplicity ... It is as though, for poetry, general words will do, with occasional glimpses or insights for added effect, as in Rossetti's [*sic*] 'The woodspurge has a cup of three'. (1964: 83–4)

This striking declaration and illustration of striving for simplicity in poetry, for 'plain simple English words', is itself not problematic until we see it set against remarks made in the paragraph which directly follows it. There Thomas discusses what he sees as a widening urban experience and the emergence of a 'new vocabulary' required to accommodate and express that experience:

Once an eye for nature and a flair for describing it were the natural appurtenances of a poet. Even if the audience were townspeople, the fields were never far away, the towns being small. Most of that has changed and is going to change still more. The common environment of the majority is an urban-industrial one. The potential audience of a poet is one of town dwellers, who are mostly out of touch, if not out of sympathy with nature. Their contact with it is modified by the machine. This is tending to deprive country-rooted words of their relevance. The new modes of experience, the new subjects, the new vocabulary are creating the impression that the old words are outmoded. Rossetti's word-spurge [*sic*] has given way to 'the belt feed lever and the belt holding pawl' of Richard

Eberhart. And this is a problem which all poets must face ... One of the great questions facing the poet is: Can significant poetry be made with these new words and terms? (84-5)⁴

In this second quotation Thomas appears suddenly to be questioning the viability of his own theory as just set out in the previous paragraph, prodding poets and poetry not toward simplicity but, with Eberhart, toward experimentation with a 'new vocabulary' and accommodation of an emerging 'urban-speak'. Not only does he predict a loss of relevance for simple country words such as Rossetti's 'woodspurge', he appears to be simultaneously warning the extinction of those poets who do not keep pace sufficiently with their increasingly urban-industrial readerships. More riddling still, Thomas goes on to conclude the lecture by reverting to his original position, numbering *himself* amongst those poets destined for extinction, unwilling to abandon the old, 'outmoded' forms for the new, thereby effectively reversing his earlier support of the necessity of experimentation with a new vocabulary. In answer to his own question 'Can significant poetry be made with these new words and terms?' he writes:

In theory the answer is frequently an affirmative one. People say: 'I don't see why not'. They quote words such as chromosomes as being actually attractive. My own position is usually to allow this as a legitimate theory, but to ask in practice, 'Where are the poems?' (85)

As a final complication to all of this apparent shifting of allegiances we can say, in hindsight, that Thomas was himself destined to write such poems, against what appear to be his own scruples, if not derision. And yet in the lecture he seems adamant in his final (if theoretical) rejection of such experimentation:

Perhaps it is my ignorance of other languages that makes me say this. Maybe they are issuing from the presses in Germany or Czecho- Slovakia. Maybe it is too soon, and there has not yet been time to assimilate or absorb the enormous amount of fresh knowledge and its vocabulary. But I remember Coleridge's saying to the effect that the opposite of poetry is not prose but science. We have yet to prove that we can have both. I remember also Wordsworth's 'human heart by which we live'. The poet's function and privilege surely is to speak to our condition in the name of our common humanity in words which do not grow old because the heart does not grow old. (85)

Thomas rejects in this final quotation his earlier implication that a poet is in large measure driven by the dictates of his audience and the language of predominating experience. Here he depicts not the separating power of exterior experience but an interior unity between poet and reader which adheres in spite of those increasingly divergent experiences. He also seems to reaffirm that, for the expression and communication of that 'common humanity', the old vocabulary is best; that the old words 'do not grow old because the heart does not grow old'. His final conclusion appears to be that a simpler poetic diction not only is not 'outmoded' but is particularly and uniquely *relevant* as a language which binds interiorly a people increasingly divided on a more physical and experiential level.

Two poems published in the 1980s, however, are singularly affirmative of experimentation with the vocabulary of science. In the little-known 'Vocabulary' from *Destinations* (1985) Thomas seems to suggest not only the inevitability of these new words but the necessity for an entirely new genre of poetry under the revolutionary influence of science. In the poem's first stanza vocabulary is imaged as a restless bird, singing in its cage of time. By stanza two the bird becomes a kind of phoenix, prone to death and rebirth:

You are dust; then a bird
with new feathers, but always
beating at the mind's bars. (11)

And in a final conflation of the image at the close of the second stanza the poet is depicted as a 'new Noah' sending the bird to search for 'safe ground'. The allegorical implications achieved by this development of images are both complex and powerful. The old vocabulary seems to have come to the end of its natural life's cycle. The new vocabulary, risen from the ashes of the old, is sent out into a world destroyed, according to the myth, by the flood-waters of God's wrath, in response to the corruption of humankind. But, strangely, the post-diluvian world to which the bird vocabulary is sent to search for 'new life' is a modern world of steel; the sprig it plucks is not a 'green' poem, as of old, but a 'new poem', metallic and gleaming, product of a scientific world:

A new Noah, I despatch
you to alight awhile
on steel branches; then call
you home, looking for the metallic
gleam of a new poem in your bill.

It would seem, according to 'Vocabulary', that, while the poet retains a place in this new world, while he has been preserved from the flood, as it were, he has also been radically altered by the experience, forced into an acceptance not only of a modern technological world but of a new vocabulary and, indeed, of a new poetry which, rather than being actively set down by the poet, is necessarily *received* from the wider world over which the poet has little control. This same idea is set out again by Thomas in his 1988 collection *The Echoes Return Slow*, albeit in a new, though no less forceful, image:

'Not done yet,' mutters
the old man, fitting a bent
poem to his broken bow. (75)

The old poet here is pathetic, 'not done', and yet naively unaware of his broken tool and the deformed poem which will never fly. It is, in a sense, the poet himself who is broken here, less old in his age than in his adherence to an outmoded style. The narrator's surprising reaction to the image is to declare:

So I refine
my weapons: beams, gases;
composer of the first
radio-active verses.

The question remains, what to make of all this apparent confusion concerning the language of poetry. What *is* R. S. Thomas's position on the use of a scientific vocabulary? In his own words 'can significant poetry be made with these new words and phrases?'. And what is one to make of the apparently shifting ground found in his remarks on the subject in 'Words and the Poet' and in the poems we have looked at above?

One answer to the curious confusion concerning language which we find in Thomas's 'Words and the Poet', and one that the majority of Thomas's poems support, is that so far as it can be said that Thomas, in 'Words and the Poet', is setting out a philosophy of language, that philosophy is grounded in the precision and power of a simple diction, while at the same time remaining fluid enough to accommodate the possibility of experimentation with a newer, urban-industrial or scientific diction, despite the clash of such experimentation with the poet's more fundamental impulses. We might view Thomas both as the old man in the poem from *The Echoes Return Slow*, and as the nuclear warrior from 'Vocabulary'. Not only does he seem to hold to both positions in theory, but turning to the poems one finds a 'miraculous simplicity' born of

‘plain simple English words’, standing alongside a more radical experimentation with the ‘new vocabulary’ of modern science. As I have already mentioned, such experimentation becomes widespread only in the later poems, where it is often characterised by an ‘escalating irony’ which I will look at more closely in Chapter 5. None the less, it is possible to see these dual forces of simplicity and experimentation working more or less in tandem across Thomas’s oeuvre. A brief chronological sampling from the poems helps to illustrate this. For example, Thomas’s second volume, *An Acre of Land* (1952), is stylistically devoted to the lyrical but precise use of predominantly Anglo-Saxon and monosyllabic words. Repeatedly we come across lines as pure and powerful as these from ‘The Hill Farmer Speaks’:

I am the farmer, stripped of love
And thought and grace by the land’s hardness;
But what I am saying over the fields’
Desolate acres, rough with dew,
Is Listen, listen, I am a man like you. (17)

And yet even as early as this one might suggest just a glimmer of the poet’s later preoccupation with a ‘newer’ language and ironic tone in the final lines of ‘The Welsh Hill Country’ in which we are told that the man still farming at Ty’n-Fawnog is ‘Contributing grimly to the accepted pattern, / The embryo music dead in his throat’ (7). Contrasts between a dedication to simplicity of utterance and a forward-looking poetic experimentation become more clearly accentuated by the volume *Pieta* (1966). The poem ‘Gifts’, for example, communicates the sense of a linguistic reduction down to essentials:

From my father my strong heart,
My weak stomach.
From my mother the fear. (17)

Of course by ‘linguistic reduction’ I do not mean to suggest simplicity either of technique or of effect or meaning. The precision of these clipped lines, their spare diction, their omission of main verbs and conjunctions, may, for a moment, obscure the fact that the actual object(s) of the poet’s ‘fear’, and the more exact implications of ‘strong heart’ and ‘weak stomach’ remain open to a wide range of interpretation. Beneath the ‘simplicity’ of these lines one discovers a heightened resonance, and the possibility of multiple or complex inference. Juxtaposed to such linguistic paring down, however, we find in the same volume more technically complex phrases such as ‘viruses invade the blood’, ‘the geometry

of their dark wings', and 'the molecules and the blood's virus', vocabulary and evocations clearly moving the poetry in a different direction. Thomas's collection *H'm* (1972), which I have suggested signals a turning by the poet towards a deeper engagement with scientific language and issues, often retains the lyricism so characteristic of his early work. In the poem 'Pouf', for example, he writes:

It was March.
A wind
Blew. Sudden flowers
Opened in the sea's
Garden. (13)

But in a poem like 'Earth', also from *H'm*, one finds not only a more complex vocabulary but a corresponding convolution of thought and manipulation of imagery, all of which contribute towards a sense of the poem less as the reflection of wisdom recollected, and more as a strenuous and unfinished activity, a reaction involving various degrees of flux, strain, and distress:

We are misled
By perspective; the microscope
Is our sin, we tower enormous
Above it the stronger it
Grows. (28)

Moving to the 1980s, Thomas's volume *Experimenting with an Amen* (1986) exhibits perhaps the most extreme combinations of traditional diction and experimentation with a more technical vocabulary. One finds there lines such as these from 'Nativity':

The moon is born
and a child is born,
lying among white clothes
as the moon among clouds. (46)

And yet standing in dramatic contrast are these lines from 'Reply' in the same volume:

Do the molecules
bow down? Before what cradle
do the travellers from afar,
strontium and plutonium, hold out
their thin gifts? (65)

What is perhaps most important in the comparison here is that both poems concern the birth of Christ, and yet the presentation of each, the diction employed, the tone achieved, even the stanzaic formatting, are clearly at odds, emanating from different sources as it were, the former rooted in an extreme simplicity which lends it a bardic or visionary quality, the latter rooted in a more radical experimentation and political protest. We can see this same duality in Thomas's final collection, *No Truce with the Furies* (1995). Note the almost elemental austerity of the following lines from 'At the End' in which the simplicity of language, of utterance, not only echoes the room's physically spartan interior but, by implication, creates a sense of the narrator's own spiritual interior as similarly unencumbered:

Few possessions: a chair,
a table, a bed
to say my prayers by,
and, gathered from the shore,
the bone-like, crossed sticks
proving that nature
acknowledges the Crucifixion. (42)

And yet in contrast to the stillness which emanates from 'At the End', we come, only a few pages later, to these lines from 'Negative' which are fraught with the terms and tensions generated by modern science:

A child came
and what I thought in his hand
was the key to the kingdom
turned into a retort
and test-tube, and his caliper eyes
were being stretched for measuring
the widening gap between love and money. (50)

What becomes clear here is that Thomas's use of language derives from two divergent sources: from an impulse towards simplicity and even, at times, austerity of diction, as well as from an impulse towards experimentation with the new language of science. Part of what I will turn to now in Chapter 5 is the way in which that emerging linguistic experimentation is intimately linked with the intensification of Thomas's philosophical concerns over the moral value of applied science.

Notes

- 1 The titles of two of Thomas's collections themselves attest to this effort towards the reintegration of religion and science: *Laboratories of the Spirit* was published in 1975, and *Experimenting with an Amen* was published in 1986.
- 2 I am thinking in particular here of the first section of Stevens's poem in which he writes:

They said, 'You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are.'

The man replied, 'Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.' (165)

Parallels between Stevens and Thomas are less surprising in light of M. Wynn Thomas's report, in his 'Introduction' to *The Page's Drift: R. S. Thomas at Eighby*, that 'scarcely a day has passed in thirty years without his [Thomas's] reading a poem by Wallace Stevens' (1993: 12).

- 3 This focus on the prose work as 'source' no doubt runs counter to the Formalist orthodoxy which would insist on the integrity/autonomy of individual poems. It is not so much that Thomas's poems concerning science cannot stand alone, but rather that they register the effects of an argument by the poet whose roots are more visible in prose.
- 4 This excerpt from Thomas's 1963 'Words and the Poet' has its source in the poet's short 'Preface' to *The Batsford Book of Country Verse* which he edited two years earlier in 1961. Besides illustrating a long-term preoccupation with the relation of poetry to an increasingly scientific or industrial environment, the earlier version, written as an introduction for young readers, is remarkable for its candid eloquence.