

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

And this life  
that we lead, will it sound  
well on the future's cassette?

"Eheu! Fugaces", *The Way of It*

Ronald Stuart Thomas was born on March 29, 1913 in Cardiff, to Welsh parents. He spent much of his childhood in England and he was raised and schooled in Holyhead where "his boyhood was spent on the verges of the sea, in ports, and at the extreme edges of Wales" (Morris 47). Thomas later studied classics at the University College of North Wales in Bangor. His parents were not Welsh-speaking, but the Welsh language had such an attraction for Thomas. He longed to be part of the Welsh community and, in an effort to do so, he learnt the Welsh language in earnest when he was 30. Similarly, he was attracted to the hills of Wales and chose to serve their inhabitants when ordained in 1936 in the Church of Wales.

Thomas had “always tried to live and work in rural areas among Welsh-speaking Welshmen” (Morris 52). As a consequence of this, his first countryside living as rector was in the parish of Manafon in Montgomeryshire in 1942. As a rector, “it is significant that ... his first parish, ... at Manafon ... [was] still very much on the edge of Wales” (Morris 48). Manafon was an eye-opener to Thomas. He previously saw the place from “the train in the evening through a romantic haze”, but now he found himself “among hard, materialistic, industrious people ... Welshmen who turned their backs on their inheritance ... farmers of the cold, bare hillsides, who dreamed of saving enough money to move to a more fertile farm on the plains” (*Selected Prose* 138). Manafon “radically affected the tenor of his ideas and the dilemmas those ideas brought to his poetry” (Stevenson 41). Nevertheless, to Thomas it was a place where “the land [was] sacred” (*Selected Prose* 24) and he served there for 12 years.

His second parish was Eglwysfach where he began in 1954 and served for 13 years. He thought this was the place where he could fit in and find an untainted Wales. Unfortunately, this was not the case as this second parish, like the first, “was not pure, but mixed; once again, his need as a poet for an essentially and naturally Welsh community had been thwarted” (Morris 52). But there were developments that stand out in the poetry that he wrote: “a deepening concern with the nature of the Deity, and a more explicit, impassioned commitment to the state of Wales” (Morris 54). Referring to the English, Thomas wrote: “We don’t like your white cottage. / We don’t like the way you live” (“Strangers”, *The Bread of Truth*). He felt “sorry / for the English – [they were] a fine people / in some ways, but victims / of their traditions” (“His Condescensions Are Short-Lived”, *What is a Welshman?*). His patriotism emerged and he was more vocal concerning his Welshness.

His last parish was in Aberdaron in Llŷn where he started in 1967 and retired in 1978. Aberdaron was the place where he wrestled with "intellectual problems"; the things he felt were worth writing about were answers to questions like, "what do we mean by life, by God, [and] how to see man as a loving free creature" (Wilson 68). But most of all, because Aberdaron was a Welsh-speaking society, "at last, he could live and work and write in one of the last remaining outposts of pure Welsh Wales. He could write about his homeland from the heart of it" (Morris 57). Thomas was like a traveller who crossed "the continent / of the mind", discovering more about life, God and man ("Travellers", *The Way of It*).

He continued living in Llŷn for 15 years until 1991, when his wife of 51 years, the artist Mildred E. Eldridge, or fondly referred to by Thomas as Elsi, died. Then, he moved back to Holyhead, the place where he grew up. In 1996, Thomas married Betty Vernon, a widowed Canadian and is survived by her and Gwydion, his only son from his first marriage.

It was in his first parish in Manafon that Thomas developed "as a nature poet and as a pastoralist; but his arrival is cast in the frame of Welsh nationalism" (Wintle 201). Here in "the experience and surroundings associated with R.S. Thomas's first living", many of his poems took root (Anstey, 1982, 11). His early poems give a fair indication that the poet was "concerned to observe the hill farmer, the moorland sheepman, and the isolated labourer rather than to chronicle the social life of the village in the valley" (Morris 49). For the hill farmer, the "wind goes over the hill pastures / ... and the ewes starve, / ... The pig is a friend, the cattle's breath / Mingles with [his] ... / The hens go in and out at the door ... / The tale of [his] life is smirched with dung" ("The Hill Farmer Speaks", *An Acre of Land*). Morris also comments that Thomas's "self-selected

surroundings have exercised a profound and creative influence on his thought and his art, and a mild topographical meditation may be found” (47).

Thomas was constantly referred to as “a country priest” (Betjeman 12) because of his love for Wales. He was known to be a tremendously friendly and caring man to his parishioners and the people he knew, visiting and meeting with them ever so often over tea. But he was awkwardly cold towards strangers and acquaintances. He was a “man of temperament and moods” (Markham), who was the “strangest bundle of contradictions” (Rogers). He was “thought to be austere and forbidding” (Cox), “courteous but aloof” (Nightingale 33). In his review, Heptonstall describes Thomas as “a man of truth but not of charm.” While “[c]apable of wit, warmth and a boyish sense of humour, according to his friends, his public persona was dour, remote and idiosyncratic” (Gordon). In a 1964 interview, Thomas said this of himself: “I’m not a talker ... I don’t really like to talk. I don’t mix with people” (Nightingale 33). In another interview in 1972, Thomas said, “I am essentially an escapist, a countryman seeking the semi-seclusion of nature. I get uneasy with relationships and too much pressure from personalities” (Wilson 69). It is clear that time had not changed him. Turner records Thomas as stating, “I’m always ready to confess the things that are lacking in me, ... and particularly this lack of love for human beings.”

In his early years as a pastor, Thomas, unsurprisingly, faced many challenges. It must have certainly been difficult for a newly-ordained minister with his young bride to live in remote pasturelands amongst people who spoke a different language. There was the “disillusionment of the young poet who came to the countryside with his head full of romantic ideas” (Castay 119). Morris outlines the poet’s early struggles well, here quoted at length to retain its meaning:

Mr. Thomas was ... an import, an outsider. He had not been born and brought up in the area, and so he was not part of that thoroughly known and jealously guarded reticulation of family relationships on which Welsh social life was (and still is) based. Not to be second cousin to someone in the area sets a man apart. He was also a university man ... and education was so esteemed in rural Wales that its possessor was marooned on an island of respect. But above all, he was not 'Welsh' in the sense that Welsh was not his first language, and this makes a permanent and irreversible difference. The pure, true Welshman is born in Wales of Welsh parents, and has the Welsh language as his native tongue. Into this élite Mr. Thomas can never enter, for although he learned Welsh as an adult, and speaks it fluently, it is not his first language and never can be. (51)

Sadly, the poet had roots "he could never completely call his own" (Morris 52).

Thomas wrote of his dilemma: "England, what have you done to make the speech / My fathers used a stranger at my lips, / An offence to the ear, a shackle to my tongue ...?"

("The Old Language", *An Acre of Land*). Being known as the finest "Welsh poet writing in English" (R.G. Thomas 80) is in itself ironic. Stevenson confirms this conflict well:

"That the passion was Welsh and its expression English can be seen today as the source of harrowing tension" (38). Although his passion was to express himself in Welsh, his voice was "certainly that of an educated Englishman" (Nightingale 35).

Thomas's longest verse piece, "The Minister" (*The Minister*) which was broadcasted as a radio play for BBC Wales, "draws upon Thomas's personal experiences as a rural priest" (Wintle 247). Although not an autobiographical piece, it gives us a picture of the things Thomas experienced:

I wore a black coat, being fresh from college,  
With striped trousers, and, indeed, my knowledge  
Would have been complete, had it included  
The bare moor, where nature brooded  
Over her old, inscrutable secret.

But I didn't even know the names  
Of the birds and the flowers by which one gets  
A little closer to nature's heart.

It was through his parishes that Thomas learnt more about the life around him.

He was soon to learn to care for the people under him and to appreciate the surrounding nature, to "know the names of the birds and flowers". Thomas wrote ferociously while in ministry. He produced 27 collections of poetry; published nine books and pamphlets, and a long list of occasional prose and editorials; and he gave lectures, broadcasts and interviews. His poetry began with the publication of *The Stones of the Field* in 1946 and ended with *No Truce with the Furies*, published just five years before his death in the year 2000. He attempted to write in the Welsh language and succeeded in publishing some poems and *Neb* (translated as "Nobody" in English), an autobiographical piece. Furthermore, Thomas held international standing which is proven by the translation of his work into Japanese and French.

So, what was it that Thomas wrote that awarded him the Heinemann Award of the Royal Society of Literature (1955), the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry (1964), three of the Welsh Arts Council's Literature Awards, and had him nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996? Very simply, Thomas's works were "a concern not with picturesque landscape and colourful characters, but with man, with his place in the natural world, and with his relation to God" (Jenkins 79). His writings had "obviously been influenced by his environment. He [was] a person who enjoy[ed] being out of doors and who ... used his surroundings as a stimulus for much of his poetry" (Anstey, 1982, 10). Added to that, Thomas also wrote vehemently about Wales and the Welsh lifestyle and history. "The countryside, Wales and religion are subjects that have re-appeared continually in R.S. Thomas's poetry, but at different stages in his career the area of

emphasis has shifted” (Anstey, 1982, 11). This is not surprising, as Thomas himself commented in the opening of a broadcast that he made in 1961: “I was not born in the country, but I was brought up in it, and most of my later life has been spent in it or in contact with it. It was natural, therefore, that when I began to write, I should take my first subjects for poems from the countryside, as many of the Romantic poets did” (Anstey, 1993, 24).

Reading Thomas can be confusing and tiring, and this is often caused by the need to make out the various metaphors and symbols that he carried in his poems. He is not an easy poet to read, and an even harder one to study. But according to Markham in his Internet article, the “key to understanding Thomas is to appreciate his metaphysical leanings, his search, irrespective of place, for truth.” Thomas’s ideas were individualistic, varied and sometimes contradictory. He said this: “We have become accustomed to a dichotomy between the life and work of artists ... Daily life grows ever more artificial and superficial” (*Selected Prose* 122). Jenkins describes Thomas’s purpose well:

He ... chose to live in, and write about the life of the common people of a remote mountainous area, and hoped, by presenting man as an archetypal type, stripped of all but his elements, and isolated and half merged in an elemental natural setting, to trace the primary laws of our nature. (85)

These “primary laws of our nature” to Thomas, were reflected most accurately in the mountains and their inhabitants and Thomas wrote about both their beauties and blemishes. His was a “forthright profile in all things” (W. Davies, 2002). Thomas was very much like the infamous Welsh weather – there were constant changes of feelings of love, hate, passion, and disgust. Thomas wrote, “Hate takes a long time / To grow in, and mine / Has increased from birth” (“Those Others”, *Tares*).

The characteristic conflict of Thomas's poetry is "between the instinctual life of the Welsh peasants, rooted deep in the earth, and the menaces of civilisation; the creep of industrialism, the spread of the English way of life, the sterilising intellectualisation of living" (Nightingale 33). Jenkins is more vivid:

R.S Thomas [was] fundamentally at odds with the modern world which has put man, human consciousness, in place of God at the centre of things. He [was] absolutely opposed to an industrial and technological society which he [saw] as destructive of human dignity and man's essential need for a harmonious relationship with the natural world. He [was] opposed to the anglicisation of Wales, to all influences that threaten[ed] its national identity, to what he [saw] as English rule. (75-76)

Many of Thomas's poems spoke harshly of the issues Jenkins outlined. Thomas believed that the "enduring Welsh way of life ... should be maintained and extended against the false values of an invading English culture" (R.G. Thomas 83). He referred to the people of his neighbouring country as "blonde strangers" from whom the Welsh were "Picking up alms" ("Welsh", *The Bread of Truth*). Wilson describes Thomas's convictions well:

Thomas's poetry has provoked a fair amount of controversy – because of his uncompromising attitude to Welsh problems. Seeing the tragic realities of a dying Wales, he allied himself to what some regarded as a mythical image of a Welsh hill farmer and steeped himself in pessimism concerning God, man, and Wales that too patently stemmed from self-absorption and an inability to overcome the ambiguity of his own position – an Anglican priest writing poetry in English and being published in London. (68)

The very irony of Thomas being Welsh and writing successfully in English makes him an interesting study. Thus, this dissertation attempts to look at Thomas's views on "God, man and Wales". In his writings, Thomas took "only what [was] of use to him; he [passed] everything through the eye of a spiritual quest – for God, for Wales, for the self" (Wintle 120). It is this powerfully apt statement by Wintle that forms the title of this



dissertation. It is a study of Thomas's search for his Creator, his spiritual motherland, and his spiritual self.

The first chapter considers Thomas as a religious poet. Thomas referred frequently to Søren Kierkegaard, the famous Danish philosopher and theologian. Kierkegaard believed that there was a need for man to make a leap of faith through which "he might be able to escape the world and to enter into a personal relationship with God" (Davis, 1998, 96). Thomas made this leap of faith in his poems which, while "rationally structured, strong, spare and beautifully honed, reflect[ed] his ambivalent attitudes towards an indifferent God, a maleficent nature, and an inscrutable mankind. On this tension rest[ed] the argument of his poetry" (Adkins 248). His poems talked about hardened hearts, limited minds and unanswered prayers. In a simple but straightforward poem, Thomas wrote, "Rose Cottage, because it had / Roses. If all things were as / Simple!" ("Rose Cottage", *Pietà*). Indeed, if only things were as simple! His quest for God was definitely not a simple one. His poems "honestly faced the struggle one has, whether one is ordained or not, of praying to God and trying to worship Him" (B. Morgan). Within the searching, there was self-scrutiny as well (Jenkins 84). He spoke not only for the clergy, but for the layman. He was "a poet who work[ed] his field, constantly making his returns, going slowly back over the old ground, relentlessly working and reworking the new into the old, producing shades, echoes, reflections" (J.C. Morgan 54). Allchin proclaims that "we are encountering a major religious poet, one who is rightly to be compared with the greatest of his predecessors, a George Herbert, a Gerard Manley Hopkins" (120). Where "Herbert could envisage the ideal preacher as a stained glass window through whom the light of God's life shone in a strong mingling of colour and light, Thomas can offer us only the coarse pebble-glass of an inevitably compromised

mortal utterance” (M.W. Thomas 14).

Dyson (1981) describes this poet-priest as “the poet of the Cross, the unanswered prayer, the bleak trek through darkness, and his theology of Jesus, in particular, seems strange against any known traditional norm” (296). “His austere, intransigent honesty appears both in his early work, with its compassion for his parishioners, the Welsh hill folk, imprisoned in the daily routines of survival, and in his great religious poems. In these he torture[d] himself with his need for God and his desolating sense of His apparent absence. He [was] the poet not of Resurrection but of the untenanted Cross” (Cox). Indeed, doctrinally Thomas was “notoriously difficult to pin down. Extreme Catholics [saw] him as something of a Protestant, while Protestants [saw] him as something of a high churchman” (Wintle 135). Not only did this break from convention encompass the search for God, but the search for Wales as well. The question remains: “This is where he sought God. / And found him?” (“Llanrhaeadr ym Mochnant”, *Not That He Brought Flowers*). For Adkins, it is “through the poet’s search for God, a remote and indifferent God, that the self becomes emptied, annihilated, remade” (255). Thomas frequently spoke of “the sense of constant failure, of a feeling of dryness and frustration at the silence and absence of God. He [held] out his hands to receive God’s gifts. They remain[ed] empty” (Allchin 122). He was a man who despaired of “a world out of contact with God” (Astley 74). But above all, as Brown states, “the real significance of the pilgrimage ... is not the achievement of a vision of God but the assertion of faith that the hazardous journey represents, the effort of overcoming doubt and the arrival at fuller realisation of the nature of God, and of self” (1993b, 164). Thomas “looked truth / in the eye” (“Truly”, *Experimenting with an Amen*).

Above and beyond this “hazardous journey”, to Thomas, “our minds / are of glass ... and / refrigerate us with a different view” (“Aie!”, *Between Here and Now*). Thomas wished to enlarge the mind’s view on life and he did this by breaking away from the conventions of thought, especially concerning religion and God. Even when man fails to find God, there will always be hope because the Divine announces, “tell them I am” (“The Hand”, *Laboratories of the Spirit*). Allchin confirms that “the eye itself can be made clean, cleansed to perceive the light of God in and through the light of day” (123). Like a painter, Thomas possessed “His means of conducting the eye; his strategies of arriving at a focus or point of rest; ... [and] his interweaving of perception and interpretation ... [which] attract our deepest interest and respect” (Vendler 81). Thomas always seemed “aware that to explore the realm of the spirit [was] to be almost irremediably lost in a wilderness of stories each of which [was] capable of alternating between truth and illusion as rapidly as the flashings of a fluorescent light” (M.W. Thomas 14-5). He delved into “the theme of man before God, or better the theme of man in God, and God in man” (Allchin 120). We understand Thomas by understanding that to him, the Messiah came “in the simplest / things, in the body / of a man hung on a tall / tree” but He proclaimed that “you shall not know me” (“Mediations”, *Laboratories of the Spirit*).

It is from Thomas that we obtain fresh revelation that we need to change “in our approach to God, [because] known by each one of us in a way unique to himself, there is a hidden continuity, a vital if unseen identity” (Allchin 127). The poet-priest wished to have a “dialogue, encounter, confrontation” with God and was after “a direct method of address, a resonant style for negotiating the Via Negativa” (Mole, 1982, 133). While Thomas heard God’s words “at [his] peril” (“Shadows”, *Frequencies*), he also reached “a

new acceptance of the world as God-given, and therefore full of the presence of God” (Allchin 128). Thus, with a broadened mind, we travel with Thomas in the first chapter on a journey towards a search for God.

The second chapter discusses Thomas’s relationship with Wales and the Welsh people. He dissected the life of the peasant: “Consider this man in the field beneath, / Gaitered with mud, lost in his own breath” (“Affinity”, *The Stones of the Field*). Many of Thomas’s works often reflected a dichotomy of moods and emotions: he was positive about Wales one moment, and the next, he was bitter. We are presented with “a view of Wales as a mean and peasant land, immemorially sunk in bible-black gloom” (M. W. Thomas 10). But ultimately, to Thomas,

The two things that appeal most strongly to [his] imagination are Wales and nature, especially as the latter manifests itself as the background to a way of life. [He] believe[s] that there is profound and lasting value in both concepts. (*Selected Prose* 83)

He was constantly critical of his subjects, especially the peasants. While they formed the backbone of many of his poems, he did not always refer to them kindly. “Thomas’s melancholy [was] derived ... from a distaste for much in the world around him, and from a bleak recognition of how far man [has fallen] from the state of grace” (Jenkins 84). One possible reason for his critical distaste could be in what Thomas announced: “in my contact with others, or out in the world of nature, I see something, begin to turn it over in my mind, and decide that it has poetic possibilities. The main concern will be not to kill it” (*Selected Prose* 170-1). Indeed, finally, the skill of the poet is seen in the fact that he does not “kill” the subject. If it is meant to be beautiful, then it will be described as beautiful; if ugly, then, as ugly. But undoubtedly, Thomas always “pitied rather than despised those who [could not] look up from the barren soil and their

hard tasks to see the beauty of Welsh scenery” (Betjeman 13). It was their inability to see the rich source of life surrounding them that caused the peasants to become tired and overworked. His early poems were characterised by this: “the rural labourer isolated on an expanse of bleak hillside, engaged in grim monotonous work, watched from a distance by the poet” (Brown, 1993b, 150). Although he regarded the farmer as “Unnatural and inhuman” whose “wild ways [were] not sanctioned” (“Valediction”, *An Acre of Land*), Thomas was “determined to make his readers aware of the hard struggle of the hill farmers in Wales, and to draw attention to the decline of aspects of Welsh life that he considered to be important” (Anstey, 1982, 12). This task was possible because as “a rector in the Church in Wales he represented a certain kind of spiritual, cultural and social authority” (Morris 50).

In addition, modernisation and industrialisation were aspects which Thomas criticised harshly. He felt that Wales was

being subjected to the winter of industrialism, mechanism and rationalism, and the spirit of man [was] longing for an escape to the summer pastures once again. For this was its traditional life. Industrialism [was] but an interlude in an age-old process. Yet there [were] people who talk[ed] as though [they] had but recently begun to live. (Jenkins 81)

The benefits of industrialisation did not impress Thomas. They made farming simpler but to Thomas, they made life more complicated.

Thomas studied the peasant as closely as he could. He wondered, “What was going on in their heads? ... [But the] question remains unanswered to this day” (Stevenson 41). One main focus concerning the peasants is Iago Prytherch, an icon created by Thomas to represent several things. Prytherch came about through an experience that Thomas described in his “first incumbency in the Montgomeryshire

foothills in 1942” (Anstey, 1993, 28), while “visiting a 1,000 feet up farm in Manafon” (Savill 51):

I came in contact for the first time with the rough farm folk of the upland valleys. These were pre-tractor days. Their life was a hard slog in wind and mire on hill slopes with the occasional brief idyllic interludes ... I responded with the first of my poems about Iago Prytherch, a sort of prototype of this kind of farmer. (Anstey, 1993, 28)

It was “the gnawing bafflement and pity he felt when faced with people like Prytherch that set him writing” (Stevenson 42). To Thomas, Prytherch was “with the torn cap” (“The Gap in the Hedge”, *An Acre of Land*); he “crossed [his] brow with grief” and his heart was as “dry as a dead leaf” (“Lament for Prytherch”, *Song at the Year’s Turning*). It was in writing about Prytherch and similar peasants that Thomas “began to develop a poetic style that was his own. His originality [lay] in the sharpness of his focus and the clarity with which he outline[d] his chosen landscape” (Anstey, 1982, 13). When reading him, “we become involved in this struggle towards a resolution of the poet’s own Chaos: that the poems should have such a general application to the condition of man, using simple language and a simple and integrated imagery in a world as complex and fragmented as we now inhabit, is an achievement of major poetic significance” (Savill 64). Prytherch was a simple farmer; he and “his kin belong[ed] not to the village but to the hills” (Morris 50). Prytherch led Thomas to contemplate on several things:

... it was while walking there, and talking to the farmers and laborers who went to form the composite figure of Prytherch, that [Thomas] heard the Welsh language spoken as the normal language of discourse. It became clear to him that he was alienated from these people, whose way of life fascinated him, by a complicated system of chasms and barriers. (Morris 50)

Stevenson is of the opinion that finally, Prytherch “was a projection of an idea; a partner in a purely internal dialogue” (46).

Also, Thomas's quest was to see a liberated Wales. His earlier poems portrayed Wales as "a country torn between the demands of traditional culture and modern civilization, wrenched forward by the gaudy pressures of the present, pulled back by a history 'brittle with relics'" (Abbs 104). This caused "'a yawning gulf' ... [to open up] between the anglicized gentry and the ... Welsh-speaking majority" according to historian Kenneth O. Morgan. Also, Morgan notes that Welsh culture "emerged ... from the tenant farmers and labourers of their smallholdings" (Stevenson 45). Thus, in order to study Wales, all one needs to do is to study the farmers and labourers. This is what we see Thomas doing in Chapter Two.

Chapter Three reflects on Thomas as "a wonderfully free spirit" (W. Davies, 2002), in his dual roles as poet and priest. His calling as priest complements his work as an artist of words. One imposes on the other, but each is necessary to the other. Without doubt, his poetry "bears an obvious relation to his life as a priest in the Welsh countryside" (Castay 119). Thomas believed that "his chief duty as an artist is to beautify, to purify and to enlarge that way of life" (Jenkins 79). It is interesting to analyse the struggles he had not just as a poet who was attached to the Church, but also as a Welsh poet. There was always a sense of "personal questioning" (Anstey, 1982, 13) of his vocation as priest, his love for writing, and his duty as a Welshman. Thomas, "as a priest and scholar, with the poet's extra dimension of perception, has had certain recurrent problems to which he has sought an answer" (Savill 53). But the answer was always within the entangled ropes of his dual vocations.

At some point in his writings, Thomas appeared to have had "a resentment at the formality of relationship and apartness which both his priesthood and his poetry imposed on him" (Wilson 70). But he took all these in his stride, grateful that life as a pastor,

though “more taxing than many think, [left] him plenty of time to write” (Nightingale 34). Things fitted in well, although not perfectly. For Thomas, “It was because there was nothing to do / that I did it; because silence was golden / I broke it” (“Pluperfect”, *Between Here and Now*). Thomas’s honest and somewhat strange humour is unorthodox and unlike the conventional norm of what is expected of a poet-priest. He was “his own ‘movement’ – already alternative within an alternative culture” (W. Davies, 2002), “a sculptor who [brought] out as in stone an image in his mind” (Price 25).

In reading Thomas, Shepherd states quite aptly:

If we come to R.S. Thomas looking for reassurance and comfort, we shall certainly be disappointed. But if we come willing to explore with him what it means to be human, if we are willing to accept all the disorder of life and not insist on imposing order, if we are prepared to ‘sit loosely to orthodoxy’, then the unorthodoxy of his work, arising as it does from a fearsome integrity, will at least force us to think for ourselves, and at best liberate us for that doubt which makes faith continuously creative. (9)

With regard to Thomas, sitting “loosely to orthodoxy” and being inconsistent when describing his subjects were not paramount issues. He did not think that it would make him seem fickle. In fact, he said, “I am a lyric poet, I think. A lyric poet to me is a person who changes, you don’t ever remain the same for long ... [t]he Welsh climate changes, and to live in Wales is to be conscious of these changes” (Lethbridge 39). Changes were welcomed in Thomas’s life, although he did not welcome industrialised and modernised changes. Thomas was candidly and painfully honest about the ill-effects of modernisation and how it sucked out the life of man. He reflected this strongly in his writings, so much so that the “heroic honesty of the man [was] so close to the poetry, rich yet pellucid, on this question of identity” (W. Davies, 2002).



In Thomas's poems about paintings, he investigated "ways in which we retrospectively construct for ourselves a life out of our remembered experiences" (M.W. Thomas 13). Thus, Chapter Three studies the life of Thomas as a poet and priest, with the thought in mind that due to the fact that Thomas lived a life that spanned 13 years short of a century, he was able to shift his focus, yet always remain true to his passion for Wales and for the search of God. Allchin universalises Thomas:

The poet's inner struggle, the priest's inner struggle, is linked with the great struggle which has been and is going on in the whole of our Western world, perhaps in the whole of humanity. (125)

Davis (1998) quotes R.W. Emerson as stating that "[t]he true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both" (95). It is certainly true of Thomas that the way he saw the role of poetry was as "presenting and preserving centrally relevant truths about the nature and purpose of human existence, and of their capacity to exert an influence on human action" (Jenkins 75). He did this through his language, which could be "colloquial to the point of flatness" (Price 21). To R.G. Thomas, Thomas had the "essential quality of [a] poet: deliberate withdrawal, severe concentration, clear-sighted purpose, ironic detachment, a half-concealed pride in his chosen role, absolute truth of bare statement, and a grateful awareness of his growing audience" (81). Presently, Thomas is known to be "one of the most uncompromising, purest and most sustained lyric voices of his century" (Ezard & Gibbs) who was "never ... shy to express uncompromising opinions, echoing statements made in his poetry" (Wintle 282). Thomas certainly made his mark as a poet.

Morris comments that Thomas's work "takes its origin from dissatisfactions, it broods and breeds in discontent, it is essentially a poetry of search" (57). His poetry "of Wales, of Iago Prytherch, of spiritual search, and of painful self-examination – is

profoundly all of a piece. It is a single, unified body of work because it stems from a single source; from an indomitable conscience that refuses to acknowledge the *de facto* authority of the established order of things” (M.W. Thomas 19). Thus, as we study Thomas’s life and works, we must remember, “[w]hether we adopt Mr. Thomas’s views or not doesn’t matter; he compels us to share his emotion” (Price 25).

It is with these considerations in mind that we delve into our study of Thomas. Only after understanding the eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of this poet-priest and the issues closest to his heart are we able to fully appreciate his writings. It is also these that make Thomas both interesting and unique. We thus begin our study of this “man of contradictions” (Gordon).