

CHAPTER TWO: THE SPIRITUAL QUEST FOR GOD

How can I
find God? Out there?
He is absent. In here?
He is dumb.

"Beauty is ill", *Counterpoint*

Thomas, in addition to being a priest, was a poet of the spiritual, and he used his works as a medium in which to express his search for God. The word "God", to Thomas, was "an empty space waiting to be filled with whatever meanings the poet project[ed] into it" (Vicary 91). It was as if, for Thomas, man will define God in whatever way or form he finds God. As Thomas himself said, in his *Selected Prose*, "[t]o one person, God may reveal himself as a loving shepherd leading to green pastures; to another as a consuming fire" (159). Thomas's search was to find a definition of God for himself, one that made sense to him. His pursuit was of a deepening concern with the nature of God. In this chapter, we attempt to discover what it was that encompassed this "empty space". We will see how Thomas wrote about images of God as a machine or with machine-like

functions, and how this image evolved. Also, we will study Thomas's elusive and dark God who plays hide and seek with man. These themes seem to cover the majority of his poems and interestingly, they are present, however subtly, from his early works until his latest.

Thomas's search for God began early in his life. Thomas's childhood without a father left a great impact in his life, not only emotionally, but also spiritually. His father was never around: "Even when the father [was] there, he [was] absent" (Wintle 90). It is not difficult to understand why Thomas perceived God as absent, as his father failed to instill any sense of authoritative presence in Thomas as a child. Perhaps because Thomas was not able to express disappointment about the absence of his earthly father, he shifted this obvious frustration towards God. Thus, many of Thomas's poems before the 1980's cried out loudly and despairingly about the cruel absence of God the Father. The elder Thomas, who was constantly called to sea, became "the prototype of the great emblem of the poet's later work: of the *deus absconditus*", the hidden and concealed God, the God who was there "by not being there, and whom R.S. Thomas [waited] for by the sea's edge" (Wintle 90).

At the "sea's edge" was literally where Thomas waited. The sea is a strong image in Thomas's works. Wintle analyses this image as representing two opposing realities. Firstly, it is a "mirror that reflects nature in its tranquil, ordered state, the heavens even, [and] all the generosity of God's creation." Secondly, it is "a 'window' through which the horrors and the turmoil of the same creation can be viewed" (302). Thomas himself, in his Welsh autobiography, *Neb*, explained that the outer aspect of the sea acts as a mirror, enabling one to see "all the beauty and glory of creation". Meanwhile, the inner aspect is

like a window, where “one sees perpetual warfare”; it is a hiding place for all of “the creator’s failed experiments” (Brown, 1993b, 162).

From a reading of several poems concerning the sea in the volume *Young and Old*, Wintle’s second explanation seems to be more substantial. While the sea captures the fullness of creation, it is at the same time, a window onto much hardship. It is where “the shark’s / Fin passes, [like] a dark sail” (“Seaside”, *Young and Old*), holding hidden dangers. Davis (1998), in his article, draws on Kierkegaard’s use of the metaphor of the sea in distinct ways. When one goes to sea, one goes “out in the sea of thought, out in ‘70,000 fathoms deep’” (102). This suggests the depth of the ever-present danger in the individual’s struggle in life, specifically in maintaining a relationship with God. Thomas certainly felt that Kierkegaard understood this struggle well, as he alluded to this famous Danish theologian and philosopher more than once. To Thomas, the sea could crack, pummel, scrub and scour, chewing “rocks / To sand” (“The Sea”). Prayer is a double-edged sword; it is both painful and essential. Like the sea, prayer or praying leaves one cracked, pummelled, scrubbed and scoured. The person who prays is like one who ventures out to sea: he is vulnerable to God’s prompting and correction. Prayer then, like the sea, can be a dangerous thing. Its “embraces / Leave you without breath” (“The Sea”). Not surprisingly, Thomas was sometimes hesitant to enter this testing ground. Furthermore, his search often ended in disappointment. What he thought was a glimpse of God coming towards the shore from the horizon was often merely a figment of his imagination, a projection of his desire. God’s presence was like the waves that beat harshly on the cold sand before drawing quickly back.

Nevertheless, it was Thomas’s tenacity, determination and stubbornness that enabled him to finally find God not only in the horizon, but all around that “sea’s edge”.

He recognised that the sea was an area with “Grey waters, vast / as an area of prayer / that one enter[ed]” (“Sea-watching”, *Laboratories of the Spirit*). He wrote, “Daily / over a period of years / I have let the eye rest on them [the grey waters].” “Was I waiting for something?” he wondered. Or was he just opening himself to frustration and confusion? He often contemplated whether to delve into this act of prayer. Allchin writes about “Sea-watching”:

Watching the sea, praying, living one’s life; they have much in common. Gradually we find that we are learning to look. Through the long silence and the emptiness a presence makes itself known. ‘After its long fast’ from thoughts and explanations, from expectations and plans, the mind becomes single, the eye is enlightened, watching becomes prayer. (121)

It is this journey of contemplation and tenacity that will be studied further, and we will study how Thomas’s eye was “enlightened”. J.C. Morgan confirms this by stating that “[p]rayer becomes a part of the natural rhythm ... in league with the cry of the beasts and the crash of the surf” (61).

In an interview with Ned Thomas and John Barnie, Thomas stated that he strongly rejected the idea of deism. He explained it as “the belief in a God who once made the world, and then left it to run by itself, like a self-correcting machine, a pioneer of negative feedback” (39). Thomas asserted in the interview that this was not what he believed in. Clearly, therefore, the poet wanted to make sense of a God who was a personal being, one who took interest in the daily affairs of man, but who nevertheless did not choose to interrupt these affairs which were based on freedom of will. Thomas’s God “relate[d] to mankind, but not in the comforting ways we might wish” (Rosenthal). To Thomas, “if talk of the eternal [was] to have any sense it must be mediated in the events, good and bad, which befall us” (Phillips 128). So, the study of events becomes a

mirror to the understanding of God. The world is not left to “run by itself” like a machine, because that would reduce its creator to the level of a machine.

But contradictorily, in several of Thomas’s poems, God is in fact, referred to as a machine. The niggling question refuses to disappear: Had God, who is pictured as “unremittingly cruel and hostile” (Allchin 119), created the world, and then left it to work on its own, with a “clinical indifference to [man’s] pain” (Williams 83)? At times, this appeared to be Thomas’s view and again the shade of deism reappears to haunt the mind. However, this is qualified by the thought that God is omnipresent, “only removed from us” (Phillips 153) in his transcendence and our finite understanding. These dual and opposing, almost Frankenstein-like ideas, of whether God is machine-like or not, and whether He is near or removed, reflect Thomas’s conflict in his struggle in search of God. Thomas acknowledged this in an interview, stating that his work *was* ironic: “What I’m tilting at is not God, but the ideas of God” (Lethbridge 40). There are certainly sufficient implications made of the connection between God and the machine; therefore, it is this idea that will be looked at first.

The disturbing manner in which Thomas saw God and the world as machine reflected his own deep and angry doubts that the ever-absent God could be personally concerned about the fate of man. For Thomas, it was not so much the problem of deism, but the strangeness of a God who claimed to be personal and accountable, yet did not appear to act out his responsibility towards his creation.

A handful of Thomas’s poems mention the machine and it is interesting to study the images and meanings of this machine. The machine is something devoid of feelings and emotions. Thomas lent this description to God in “Ivan Karamazov” (*Laboratories of the Spirit*). Here, God is:

a kind of impossible robot
you insert your prayers into
like tickets, that after a while
are returned to you with the words
'Not granted' written upon them.

There seems to be no personal interaction and desire to ease man's confusion on God's part. He is not only a "robot", but he is "impossible". Man cannot make God out. Humans feed "the machine / Their questions, knowing the answers / Already, unable to apply them" ("Digest", *H'm*). If and when answers are received, they are negative and irrelevant ones. The world is mechanical and sterile, with no free will and creativity, because God himself, like a machine, takes prayers to be mere "tickets". This very impersonal and icy side of God is brought out in an uncomplimenting manner. Thomas "repudiate[d] such a god" ("Ivan Karamazov").

To Thomas, God was "a poet who sang creation ... and He's also an intellect with an ultra-mathematical mind, who formed the entire universe in it" (Turner). As Williams states: "We and our world are internal to the mathematics of God's mind" (82). In "At It" (*Frequencies*), God is the Designer of machines and the God of Science. Here, the Creator is sitting somewhere at a table, creating man in his head and writing out "that abstruse / geometry" in "invisible handwriting the instructions / the genes follow." Man is typically robotic and machine-like, taking after the character of his detached Creator who has "more the face / of a clock". Thomas's God becomes "a mathematician to whom the design of machines must be second nature" (Gitzen 174). Emotions are pushed aside in order for the machine to function effectively. The machine-like God directs plans which are not humanly understood as they are in "invisible handwriting". However, these plans must be adhered to because it is the Omniscient One who "presides over the interiors and

intricacies of science" (Shepherd 122). He is the "vertical God, / whose altitudes are the mathematics / that confound us" ("The Cast", *Experimenting with an Amen*).

In his own life, Thomas seemed so disillusioned with the rapid advancements of technology that the picture of God as machine-like, man as machine-like and basically the world as machinery, was carried through and reiterated for many decades in his poetry. For Thomas, the human mind was "not satisfied with the world of scientific theory" (Shepherd 123).

In "Once" (*H'm*), we are presented with the creation of man and at the end, as Adam and Eve move forward "to meet the Machine", "we sense imminent discord and disaster" (Abbs 102). The image of God as machine and machine-like evolves further into the idea that the machine becomes the new god of this world. The suggestion is not merely that God is a machine, but the mechanical aspect has somehow detached itself and become separate from the divine God. The machine thus became Thomas's great enemy in his poems: "Ripped from God's side, the Machine [became] an agent of satanic disobedience in the poetry" (D.W. Davies). For instance, in "Other" (*H'm*),

God secreted
A tear. Enough, enough,
He commanded, but the machine
Looked at him and went on singing.

The machine possesses a life of its own independent of God, yet is still influenced by and influencing the Creator. Thomas once commented, "I've been dealing with the machine and the concept of deity – how you can connect the machine, which is potent with so much evil, with deity and omnipotence" (Wilson 67). The machine gains control of man's ways and takes over the role of God, as seen in *Counterpoint* ("Crucifixion"):

‘The body is mine and the soul is mine’
says the machine. ‘I am at the dark source
where the good is indistinguishable
from evil.

The dark, evil source of the machine now owns the body and soul of mankind. Thomas felt that the machine corrupted the moral sense of man, so much so that one was unable to distinguish between right and wrong.

In “Earth” (*H’m*), “The machine replaces / The hand that fastened you [Jesus] / To the cross, but cannot absolve us”. The hand of God the Father, who allowed Christ to be crucified on the cross, is now ironically replaced by the grim machine. This act dehumanises life and makes the Crucifixion useless. Man no longer looks to Christ for salvation as he deems this unnecessary. Instead, the machine is able to provide a form of salvation, although it “cannot absolve” man. Here, in the “disinfected world of the machine, sacrifice may no longer be necessary, but at the same time its spiritual benefits are no longer available” (Triggs).

Williams voices the thought that Thomas’s “God makes a maker, to show himself as maker to the world” (85). It could be that the machine is an agent of mischief deliberately introduced by a jealous God: “[God] began planning / The destruction of the long peace / Of the place [earth]” (“Other”, *H’m*). The machine appears to be part of God’s plan. It becomes God’s “other”, thus the significance of the title. Thomas felt he was left with no choice but to accept “the presence of / the machine” (“Emerging”, *Laboratories of the Spirit*). Where once he “would have asked / healing”, he now went “to be doctored” because the machine’s presence was all-encompassing in human life.

Although the machine may not be altogether out of the plan of God, it nevertheless competes with the Divine. In “Soliloquy” (*H’m*), it is God’s turn to complain: “Within the churches / You built me you genuflected / To the machine”. God’s

place as the Divine to be worshipped has been threatened. In *Counterpoint* (“Was there a resurrection?”), Thomas questioned: “Did the machine put its hand / in man’s side, acknowledging lordship?” Yes, in fact, it did. The machine had overtaken God: “Did I see religion, / its hand in the machine’s, / trying to smile as the grip / tightened?” (“Asking”, *Experimenting with an Amen*). To Thomas, the machine was “a symbol of all sorts of technology and scientific curiosity” (Shepherd 116). Thomas groped “his way towards an understanding of God that [was] more overtly in tune with the ‘scientific’ culture around him” (Wintle 429). He had to adjust to “an encroaching materialism and a growing dependence on a utilitarian technological culture” (Phillips 154) symbolised by the machine.

This “utilitarian technological culture” is caused by man’s over-dependence on the machine in chasing after modernisation and materialism. In Thomas’s works, “the machine appears as an overarching metaphor for the modern industrial world” (Triggs). Returning to “Other” (*H’m*):

The machine appeared
In the distance, singing to itself
Of money. Its song was the web
They were caught in, men and women
Together.

The machine traps the minds and souls of man, pushing materialism into them. It puts man “at the mercy of the machine” (D.W. Davies).

Not surprisingly, Thomas remained consistent as an enemy of progress although the world directly around him and that beyond was sucked into increased mechanisation and triumphal materialism “in the face of televised internationalism” (Gitzen 174). It is editor-journalist-critic Ned Thomas who concedes with the poet that the modern technological world, “like the machines themselves, [is] the product of a limited mind-

set, accepting of the banal” (Brown, 1993b, 166). Technology “appears as the enemy of an indigenous Welsh culture assailed by the alien and pernicious modern ‘miracles’ of Anglo-American cultural imperialism” (D.W. Davies). God has been pushed aside.

Technology and modernisation, seen in the symbol of the machine, have taken possession of the “new world” where “men now ‘pry’ for it; [they] no longer ‘pray’” (Stevenson 43). Even in his later poems, the troubling theme of the machine was not put to rest. In an untitled poem under the section “B.C.” in *Counterpoint*, the poet described God smiling at the discovery that the controls on the earth “were working”. The efficient rules of evolution were put into effect, that is, “the small [was] / eaten by the large, the large / by the larger.” Here, it seems that part of God’s blueprint for earth involves the law of survival, where only the fittest survive. With evolutionary laws firmly in place, God can afford to rest, to “smile”. When any problem regarding the possible extinction of a species arises, a rigid, mechanical solution is used. When “history’s wheel / [is] idle” the wheel of human life is automatically started “all over again”. God sits back and just pushes the buttons. In another poem, Thomas wrote:

God looked at the eagle that looked at
the wolf that watched the jack-rabbit
cropping the grass, green and curling
as God’s beard. He stepped back;
it was perfect, *a self-regulating machine*
of blood and faeces.

“Rough”, (*Laboratories of the Spirit*)(emphasis mine)

The world may be imagined “as a machine devised and powered by God (a ‘great ‘dynamo)’” (Williams 83). But while “Machines were invented / To cope, ... they also were limited / By our expectations” (“Remedies”, *H’m*). Man has limited God by bestowing upon him machine-like qualities.

Even in man's attempt to communicate with God, technology is the tool:

Homo sapiens to the Creator:
Greetings, on the mind's kilohertz. ...
You refer to the fading away
of our prayers. May we suggest
you try listening on the inter-galactic
channel?

"Publicity Inc.", *Later Poems*

God is sketched out as having all sorts of technological devices while fulfilling his task of hearing man's prayers. But the Omnipresent God in Thomas's religious doctrine is one who hears even the whisper of a child. Thus, to Thomas, "the evolution of a destructive technology, and the development of a 'science' [had] seemingly demystifie[d] the mystery of things" (Wintle 420). God had somehow been chased further away by the machine. Indeed, "the material world and its concomitant, the machine, [were] seen by Thomas as the chief life-destroying forces" (Triggs).

There is, therefore, no reconciliation with the machine. The 'acceptance' of the machine is "heavily ironic. It seems to hint at the notion that God's relation to the world is analogous to ours to machinery – whose structures are internal to our planning minds; the world is an instrumental or problem-solving mechanism" (Williams 82-3). Thus, God and the Machine, Theocracy and Technology are constantly clashing and overlapping. This is vividly pictured below:

Do the wheels praise,
 humming to themselves
as they proceed in unnecessary
 directions? Do the molecules
bow down? ...
 What
is missing from the choruses
 of bolts and rivets, as they prepare
for the working of their expensive
 miracle high in the clerestories
of blind space?

"Reply", (*Experimenting with an Amen*)

Although Thomas built on the idea of God as machine-like, and the world as machinery, fortunately this dismal image did not dominate his entire work. Thomas's encounter with God was not always so bleak. There were occasions when God was felt and touched, although these were few and far between. There were times when Thomas discovered the "prayer of breaking that abstruse code" that God had written ("They", *The Way of It*). In fact, God is "the code to be cracked" (Mole, 1982, 134). These encounters or near-encounters imply that while God is reachable, there is never a moment when God is completely reached. Thus, while God does reveal Himself, He does not reveal the full knowledge of Himself. Man is always walking on that path towards enlightenment. Thomas pointed out that "we are creatures; if the creature can comprehend his creator, his creator is no longer a creator" (Lethbridge 39). Also, the "created cannot apprehend the Creator" (Allchin 123). Furthermore, "what if someone found God? What would that be like?" (Phillips 122). We are "left with a God locked away in a situation beyond human comprehension and patience" (Astley 88). Thus, "[f]inite creatures can never hope to understand an infinite God. Our language, our modes of understanding, are inherently inadequate to talk of a transcendent God. God is beyond conceptual truth" (Phillips xvii).

Often, it is this element of elusiveness that overwhelms Thomas's poetry. On many occasions, God seems to have come and just left. "He is such a fast / God, always before us and / leaving as we arrive" ("Pilgrimages", *Frequencies*). Man is left on his knees, not knowing whether God is yet to come or has already left. In the end, the exploration of the absence of God becomes the solution to the search for God. The Divine is "shown in the mind's attempts at stillness or participation in order beyond itself" (Williams 86).

The idea of having just missed God is clearly reflected in the poem "Via negativa" (*H'm*). Prayer and finding God become a journey of search, and not a desired destination to be reached. There is a perennial feeling of "Seeking, / not in hope to / arrive or find". This makes finding God such a tedious journey, like walking on "a rope / over an unfathomable / abyss, which goes on and on / never arriving" ("Revision", *Experimenting with an Amen*). But in time, there arises a changed expectation of the true rival or the ultimate answer. This was Thomas's own conclusion after numerous spiritual struggles. Arrival, for him, became "the grace given to maintain / [one's] balance". As man walks on the tightrope of prayer, answers are revealed, not in the arrival at the end of the rope, but by the act of being able to continue walking the rope, though God may be silent throughout. The "Amen / is unsaid." There is no end to the prayer, or to the walk. On this note, Thomas's response to Monet's picture, "Monet: The Gas-Bréau Road" (*Between Sea and Sky*) was, "Who bothers / where this road goes? / It is not for getting people / anywhere, at least / not at speed". The "point of travelling [was] not / to arrive, but to return home" ("Somewhere", *Laboratories of the Spirit*). Moreover, in *Counterpoint* ("A.D."), Thomas affirmed that "To be alive then / was to be aware how necessary / prayer was and impossible" (sic). Ironically, prayer is necessary yet almost impossible to achieve. Essentially, Thomas discovered new truths to prayer:

... man is not always over against God, battering at him from outside. Prayer is something more mysterious than this. The relationship between man and God is much closer, more intimate ... The act of prayer is now seen not as an isolated, special activity in a little world of its own. It becomes the focal point of a whole life. God makes himself known throughout his creation, in the beauty of nature, but also in the things which seem to contradict him. (Allchin 120, 127)

Phillips adds to the idea of prayer: "Waiting on God is the paradigm of faith; waiting for God is one aspect of that faith" (68). Just as T.S. Eliot wrote in "East Coker", Thomas realised that "the faith and the love and the hope [were] all in the waiting." This aspect emerges in "Kneeling" (*Not That He Brought Flowers*) where Thomas not only waited for God, but also expected God to speak. In the past there was only a "dry whisper of unseen wings" ("In a Country Church", *Song at the Year's Turning*), but now there was a "close throng / Of spirits waiting, as [he was] / For the message". Prayer becomes the journey: "The meaning is in the waiting" ("Kneeling"). The finding is in the search. In coming to such a point, Thomas successfully reached the spiritual harbour where, for him, prayer "Slowly ... [undid] / The knot of life / That was tied there" ("Judgment Day", *Tares*).

Often in search of God, the glimpse of the Almighty that is caught is not that of the person of God, but His "echoes". They are "the footprints he has just / Left" ("Via Negativa", *H'm*). These discoveries keep the spirit of man eagerly hoping and anticipating for more of such encounters, or near encounters with God. These encounters are necessary in order to slowly usher in the real, complete and felt presence of God. To make this happen, prayer is all-important; it is "not the ritualized saying or chanting of prescribed formulae, but a contemplative offering up of the self ... [so that a] form of the dialogue with God may be established" (Wintle 409). It requires "the emptying of the self, a silencing of the will and a patient waiting and watching in these privations for God's approach" (J.C. Morgan 57).

In actual fact, this offering is difficult as "it takes time / To prepare a sacrifice / For the God" ("No Answer", *H'm*). Furthermore, there is no guarantee that what is

I would make a clear statement,
I would say that God is
More than the total of our spent prayers;
That minds indentured only by silence
Are a proof of what He is not.

Clearly, God is above and beyond comprehension: He is “More than the total of our spent prayers”. Writers Goldberg and Rayner put it well: “the only assertions we can validly make about God are negations; we can only say what He is not” (Shepherd 3).

Faith makes one certain of the supposed presence of God that is unseen, and ensures that it is sensible to hope for that presence. Thomas learnt that silence, which often was the barrier not only between himself and God, but himself and faith, might have been a “precondition of faith rather than an obstacle to it” (Phillips 60). “God cannot reveal himself to us, for that would destroy faith” (Astley 88). Thomas affirmed this, saying that he knew

all the tropes
Of religion, how God is not there
To go to; how time is what we buy
With his absence ...

“After the Lecture”, *Not That He Brought Flowers*

Thomas ended up “infer[ring] a presence in absence” (D.W. Davies). The silence of God characterises Him. As such, man must make some sense of that which is untold, such as the unheard message from the silent God. When faced with unanswered questions, the answer “[i]t is the will of God” is insufficient, for like Job, man has to work through the questions “in such a way that he did not want to ask them anymore” (Phillips 21). Man must go beyond the questions and the questioning to hear a silent yet relevant message from the silent God.

In the poem "Tell Us" (*Mass for Hard Times*), the poet proclaimed:

We have had names for you:
The Thunderer, the Almighty
Hunter, Lord of the snowflake
and the sabre-toothed tiger.

God's ambiguity leads to man's rising confusion about his name. And what good were the names "Thunderer", "Almighty Hunter" and such to Thomas? For him,

I have no faith
that to put a name to
a thing is to bring it
before one.

"Abercuawg", (*Frequencies*)

Though man has names for God in plenitude, "that does not necessarily make them real" (Deane 216). In "The Combat" (*Laboratories of the Spirit*), Thomas commented of God:

You have no name.
We have wrestled with you all
day, and now night approaches,
... and *anonymous*
you withdraw. (emphasis mine)

According to F.C. Happold, when we speak of God and give Him names, we are "translating into inadequate word-concepts something which springs from inner experience of Him" (Shepherd 3). As such, these word definitions are inadequate in defining or making sense of the Infinite God because "we try to catch him within our false linguistic conceptions" (Astley 86). Williams explains this as "the breaking-down of the questions or need with which we come ... what we would call reflective emptiness" (88). Thomas acquiesced to this, saying that God is the "Almighty / pseudonym" ("Mass for Hard Times", *Mass for Hard Times*).

In returning to *Frequencies*, "The Gap" speaks of man's attempt to define the Divine. In this attempt, man fails tragically and there is a "blank still / by [God's] name".

The Almighty is the “blank” in Life’s dictionary, a “grammarian’s / torment”, and “the equation / that will not come out.” Man cannot fully describe or define God. With philosophy only providing him with “few definitions” (Merchant 71), God leaves man, or more specifically, the linguistically capable man, with a “verbal hunger”. He is “the central darkness that defies language and meaning” (Herman 143), and is “in a ‘vacuum’ of meaning” (Astley 87). For humans, “Speech palled / on them and they turned to the silence / of their equations” (“Dialectic”, *Frequencies*). Defining the Creator would mean limiting him to “imaginable proportions [in which] we imprison and degrade him” (Astley 86). God must not be our “victim ... forced into smallness, emptiness, perhaps even silence by man’s grossest affronts” (Dyson, 1981, 325). Thus, man cannot enclose God within a definition. We must, instead, “release him from conventional language and allow his greatness to transcend all discourses” (Astley 86). In “The Porch” (*Frequencies*), to the question, “Do you want to know [God’s] name?”, the sharp answer provided is this: “It is forgotten”. No man can instruct God or name Him, as He is present at all times in all things as the eternal I AM. God therefore is “a Dark God, basically unknowable, distanced, [and] silent” (Herman 141). Shepherd observes that “[i]t is the inadequacy of images of God which prevents them from becoming idols” (88). It is the darkness of God, or the darkness that surrounds God, that is transcending. In this case, the choice of not imaging God expands and enhances our concept of the Divine by pushing it beyond the limits of our “false linguistic conceptions” (Astley 86) of the idolatrous named and known. Man must learn to push aside the obsession to “reduce God into manageable (human) categorization” (Astley 85). God’s reply to man’s questions is that:

I will answer
them as of old with the infinity
I feed on. If there were words once
they could not understand, I will show
them now space that is bounded
but without end, time that is where
they were or will be; the eternity
that is here for me and for them
there.

"Dialectic", *Frequencies*

The answers will not come now; they will only come in eternity.

John W. Kronik asserts that "[t]oday, gaps speak as loudly as presences, and no story is complete without its absences" (Davis, 1993b, 99). With regard to this, Thomas's poems are certainly very complete. In "Shadows" (*Frequencies*), the absence of words is again highlighted, "I listen / ... and hear the language / of silence, the sentence / without an end." The non-dialogue and voiceless communication with the incomprehensible darkness of God is one that is endlessly silent and silently endless. "The darkness implies [God's] presence" ("Shadows"); Thomas experienced a "kind of mental groping in the dark" where "God's metaphysically mystical presence [was] only 'visible' as a mental shadow, and, at that, it [was] only an implied presence" (Davis, 1993b, 107). Thomas believed that in the very darkness of the soul, there resided the Almighty. Davis also notes that each person, like the poet, needs to begin "the inward journey towards this silent source of sound deep in the dark of the mind where, even there, strangely enough, 'sometimes a strange light / shines'" ("Groping", *Frequencies*) (1993b, 107). Thomas said this of God: "It is not your light that / can blind us; it is the splendour / of your darkness" ("Shadows").

Thomas reiterated his view that "the world's abject darkness implie[d] God's presence" (Deane 203) because "God will never be plain and / out there, but dark rather and / inexplicable, as though he were in here" ("Pilgrimages", *Frequencies*). Christ

becomes “the indelible, invisible ‘gap’ manifest only in his present absence” (Davis, 1993b, 112). Castay aptly puts it that “God is defined by His absence, for if He was present and accessible, eavesdropping behind the door, He would not be a transcendent, infinite Being, but a finite man-like one” (127). This absence that has long been experienced can “unexpectedly reveal itself as presence” (Allchin 119-120).

God’s dark absence and elusiveness are shown in many other poems. In the collection *Frequencies*, “The Empty Church” strikingly likens the omnipresent God to “some huge moth”, with the strange hope that he would be enticed with “candles”. Like an insect drawn to the warmth and beauty of a single flame, man’s hope is that God will be attracted to the flames at the church altar. But Jesus on the cross is described as having “burned himself / before in the human flame”, referring to the sins of mankind. Due to this, “He will not come any more / to our lure”. “The church, a ‘stone trap’, is to the world what the heart (also stone) is to man: both are traps to catch God” (Davis, 1993a, 117). Mortal man cannot trap God within the confines of the four walls of the supposed dwelling of God, the church. Since God is not coming, the persona questions, why does he “kneel still”? The praying man is still “striking [his] prayers on a stone / heart.” This time, the stone heart is God’s. The implication is that man has to live with the realisation that God has come before, but He will not come again.

At some point, perhaps Thomas realised that “God happens when we are not looking for God ... The true God cannot be prepared for” (Williams 87). It is in the act of exploring that meaning is found. In the poem “In Church” (*Pietà*), Thomas turned from frustration at the silence around him to analysing “the quality / Of [the church’s] silences”. After the church was emptied of its congregation, the priest stopped to listen

To the air recomposing itself
For vigil ...
 There [was] no other sound
In the darkness but the sound of a man
Breathing, testing his faith
On emptiness, nailing his questions
One by one to an untenanted cross.

The air itself is “anointed and anoints; for God the Spirit breathes in and through the very air which we breathe and which surrounds us on every side” (Allchin 125). Thomas embraced the *via negativa*, referring to the Christian mystical tradition based on “a sense of the inadequacy of human attempts to give expression to the experience of encounter with the divine” (Vicary 96). In man’s unknowing of the Divine, he embraced the silence of God as the answer given. The *via negativa* recognises “that God is not like anything that we can know; that language is always inadequate” (Shepherd 138). Triggs, in his Internet article, supports this idea by stating that “we are betrayed by our own inability to comprehend [God], reflected in the frailties of our language”. Clifton Wolter, who translated *The Cloud of Unknowing*, states that the *via negativa* “starts with the unknowability of God ... He cannot be understood by man’s intellect” (Vicary 96). It is here in this unknowability and seeming emptiness that God dwells. The “air becomes a metaphor for God, but in so doing it ceases to be empty, silent absence” (Shepherd 132).

So instead, Thomas sensed that the air was in reality thick with a certain presence, a certain quality. What was it, if not God? Air and silence came to represent the Divine Being. Thomas attempted to discover “exactly what [was] going on ... and [noted] that no two experiences [were] quite the same” (Shepherd 133).

The Dark God fascinated Thomas. In poems as early as 1972, for instance in *H’m*, he described God as “the darkness / Between stars” (“Via Negativa”). Thomas reminded his readers that the stars were:

... fires
extinguished before the eyes' lenses
formed. The universe
[was] a large place with more of
darkness than light.

"The Listener in the Corner", *The Way of It*

Here, Thomas saw "the universe as a place of immense spiritual emptiness" (Astley 78). Yet, there was the presence of the absent God within this immense spiritual emptiness. Without darkness, stars would not be seen. In fact, the darker the skies, the brighter the stars. One must "interpret absence / as presence" ("They", *The Way of It*). As Herman puts it, "God is 'not' and therefore to know God is to know the 'nots' of his creation ... the great absence, the empty silence, the gaps in our knowledge" (149). Thomas himself launched into positive interpretations of the Dark God.

This dark gap is further likened to the mind of man where the Divine cannot be understood. He resides "within that illogical space outside human discourse" (Astley 87). Returning to Wolter, he is of the opinion that "[w]hen the mind faces him who is absolutely different it 'seizes up'; it becomes blank before a knowledge it can never assimilate because it can never understand the first thing about it; it enters a cloud of unknowing" (Vicary 96-7). Man possesses "a piece / of the universal mind that reflects / infinite darkness between points of light" ("The Possession", *Frequencies*). This is strangely paradoxical, as "within infinite darkness there could be no light ... These 'points of light' are impossible in exactly the same way that Thomas's faith is impossible. They cannot be accounted for logically" (Astley 84). Thus, in encountering the ambiguity in the "cloud of unknowing", Thomas struggled for unattainable understanding and meaning, for faith and doubt, and presence and absence to run together. The 'not' of God is explored and within the chasm of nothingness, something is discovered.

As there was nothing to act as reference, it was difficult for Thomas to confirm that God was in fact the absence that he had come to know so well. The darkness became that point of reference and a mark of a beginning: “the deepening shadow / of [God’s] presence” (“Alive”, *Laboratories of the Spirit*). We are “descending motionlessly / in space-time, not into darkness / but into the luminosity of his shadow” (“It was arranged so”, *Counterpoint*). Man usually fears what he does not understand and, therefore, it is natural to fear darkness. Ironically, however, it is in this very state of man being vulnerable and open that God can best reveal himself.

As Thomas examined the silence of God, he did not question, “Why does God not answer?” but “Why can’t I hear him?” To Thomas it began “to appear / this [was] not what prayer [was] about.” (“Emerging”, *Laboratories of the Spirit*). Prayer became a “most difficult aspect of religion” (Turner). Triggs argues that “[i]n an aggressively secular world, the efficacy of prayer to an absent God may be questioned.” Thomas continued to test this efficacy of prayer by drawing an image of a God who played hide and seek, but who was unsuccessfully ‘captured’. He asserted in *Counterpoint* (“It was arranged so”),

For a being so large
to play hide and seek! Yet the air
drew an invisible curtain
between us and him.

In “Waiting” (*Frequencies*), the impossibilities of getting “Face to face ... [or] side by side”, or anywhere near this playful God are heightened. This was different when the poet was younger. In the past, he could be “Face to face / with no intermediary / between [him] and God” (“Llananno”, *Laboratories of the Spirit*). When older, he still pronounced God, “but seldomer now.” This is reiterated in “Correspondence” (*Between Here and Now*):

Younger I deemed truth
was to come at beyond the horizon.
Older I stay still and am
as far off as before.

He felt that he had not progressed in moving nearer to the Ultimate Truth and yet his child-like faith was found in "leaning far out / over an immense depth, letting / [God's] name go and waiting" ("Waiting", *Frequencies*). He waited expectantly "somewhere between faith and doubt, / for the echoes of its arrival". Brown likens this to "a solitary pilgrimage across a dark landscape of unscalable cliffs, and terrifying abyss across which the lonely believer reaches out, longingly, uncertainly, to a God who, if He exists, is unseen" (1993b, 163). Thomas still believed that "Surely for one / with patience he will happen by / once in a while" ("Emerging", *Frequencies*). This waiting was not at all a passive or indifferent one. It was "a waiting with all the spiritual senses 'standing' ... on alert: eyes wide open, breath held, ears cocked" (Rosenthal). Faith still existed, although it was shaky as God came only "once in a while". But it is "not the eye alone which sees God. All of man must look towards him" (Allchin 123): "I looked / at him, not with the eye / only, but with the whole / of my being" ("Suddenly", *Laboratories of the Spirit*). Just like the elusive nature of God, man's faith is similarly elusive. It is at times present, and at times not. It was no longer the voice of God that Thomas awaited, but "the echoes" (as mentioned earlier in "Via Negativa"), as if God was walking away and what could be heard was merely the echoes of his voice. Similarly, in "Fishing" (*Frequencies*), where the sea is a metaphor for life, man must "wait for the / withheld answer to an insoluble / problem". What then is the problem? It is the "pursuit of the vanishing God" (Gitzen 178). Unfortunately, "any answer hangs on silence" (Davis, 1998, 104).

We return again to “Adjustments” (*Frequencies*), where God is “an unseen power”. Unfortunately, “We never catch / him at work, but can only say, / ... that here he has been.” Yes, God certainly has been present, seen in the pierced sides of his body, the untenanted cross, the linen left in the tomb. But Thomas’s unanswered “old questions lie / folded and in a place / by themselves, like the piled / graveclothes of love’s risen body” (“The Answer”, *Frequencies*). The “answer [was] absent” (Davis, 1993b, 111). Again and again, Thomas missed the answer, just as the disciples missed seeing the resurrected body of Jesus. But now, the emptiness has become a “sign or symbol for an original presence which it has displaced or replaced” (Davis, 1993a, 117). Emptiness replaces a previous presence. God is “not seen as a presence so much as an absence” (Gordon). As writer Simon Tugwell formulates it, from this “primordial Silence there comes a Word” (Shepherd 129) and that Word is silence itself. This is clear in *Counterpoint* (“A.D.”):

But the silence in the mind
is when we live best, within
listening distance of the silence
we call God.

Thomas reached a point where he was resigned to accept God’s silence as the only answer he would ever receive; experiencing and encountering God would only happen in silence and absence. He exchanged his active vocal insistence for a quiet undemanding silence. He reached a silence which was especially difficult, because it was “the silence in the mind”. Thomas came to understand that he stood in the presence of a mystery beyond man’s capacity to define or categorise, and he acquiesced by a prayerful and passive waiting, accepting whatever God wished, or wished not to show him. If it were true that “God breathes within the confines / of our definition of him” (“The White Tiger”, *Frequencies*), then Thomas would wish to silence his mind and allow the definition of God to enlarge and expand outside the borders of man’s finite mind.

Nevertheless, Thomas's search for God did not end so simply. The posture of prayerful resignation is often punctuated by the frenzied activity of the mind to understand more fully, and to do exactly what the mind has learnt that it cannot do, and that is to categorise and define the Unnameable. God "cannot be invoked as providing a canopy of meaning, let alone explanation" (Williams 88). In "Perhaps" (*Frequencies*), in a flurry of paradoxical, mind-twisting questions, Thomas took his intellect and mind to task by trying to find God there. The mind, he insisted, was "one that reflected / the emptiness that was where God / should have been." "Godhead," to Thomas, was "the colonisation by mind / of untenanted space" ("Night Sky", *Frequencies*). But now, returning to "Perhaps", the "mind's tools had / no power convincingly to put him / together." It seems as if the more knowledge and seeking that one does, the less one knows and understands – "the higher / one ascends, the poorer the visibility / becomes". This definition of God requires an open mind and an enlarging of the mind's concept of God. This is necessary in order to move away "from those misleading attempts to frame a god in our own image" (Phillips 125).

Thomas's search for the hidden and elusive God continued to be supported by many scaffoldings as seen in poems in the volume *Experimenting with an Amen*. Earlier realisations and discoveries are reiterated, despite yet more attempts by the striving mind to try to grasp God one more time. Like the shadow that cannot be captured on film, Thomas discovered again that

Moving nearer I [Thomas] found
he [God] was further off, presence
being replaced by shadow;

the nearer the light, the larger
the shadow.

"Approaches"

Over and over, he returned to this same realisation that the nearer he thought he was to God, the more he found that he did not know God. This ironic and paradoxical discovery emphasises again the shadows cast on man's mind by a God who is invisibly present; but is He too near to be present? Thomas reiterated that "Sometimes a shadow passed / between him and the light. / Sometimes a light showed itself / in the darkness beyond" ("This One"). This passing shadow, like a "passing gap, a fleeting absence of words ... conveys the poet's glimpse of eternity through mere supposition, through 'it might have'" (Humfrey 169).

Further scaffoldings that remain are seen in how God and man can never seem to co-exist at the same time, in the same place. They seem to be as "two beings ... / when one is present, the other / is far off. There is no room / for them both" ("Revision", *Experimenting with an Amen*). It is true that God leaves the room the moment man enters. But in his haste, he leaves traces and signs for man: "once ... / I thought that I detected / the movement of a curtain" ("Folk Tale", *Experimenting with an Amen*). These traces and signs kept Thomas silently wishing for more of a glimpse of the hidden God.

The image of the Dark God continues more prominently in Thomas's collection entitled *Counterpoint* (1990) which has already been referred to several times. In it is a collection of untitled verses, separated into four almost equal sections: "B.C.", "Incarnation", "Crucifixion" and "A.D.". Here, Thomas attained "the summation of his craft and his journey" (Wintle 436). The depth of his understanding reiterated his previous conclusion, which was that in great light shadows were darkest, and Thomas found some fulfilment in being near God, although it was just the darkness of God.

In Thomas's later poems, there seems to be a clearer assurance that God is still omnipotent and omnipresent though the answers are not coming, that God still wants to

be found although he is hiding, and that he is real although he is elusive. Thomas found God for himself in his own way, as in *Counterpoint*, “You [spoke] to me with two / voices, one thundering / on the ear’s drum, the other / one mistakeable for silence” (“You show me two faces”). Williams notes that it “would not be true to say that Thomas turn[ed] away from the conviction of God’s knowability in silence alone; far from it” (87). Instead, a new revelation of the person of God was acquired. His relentless pursuit of the vanishing God seemed to have liberated his imagination. The mood and tone of the poems recognise the strength gained from waiting and the insights learnt from hoping and searching. “The way on is the way through; there is a way through however dark it may seem” (Allchin 127). It is, in the end, “a search for serenity, as well as a search for God. The two are perhaps the same” (Wintle 435). It is fortunate that in many poems Thomas came close to both. He rejected “a conventional account of, and search for, ‘meaning’ ... and instead, look[ed] for a new way to express the mystery of religious faith” (Astley 75). We discover together with Thomas that God does not always work as we think he should, and truly, his ways are mysterious. Thomas’s search has been a painful and tiring one, but not one that is fruitless. He summed it up well in the lines below:

There was something I was near
and never attained: a pattern,
an explanation. Why did I address it
in person? The evolutionists told
me I was wrong. My premises,
the philosophers assured me,
were incorrect. Perpendicular
I agreed, but on my knees
looking up, cap in hand,
at the night sky I laid astronomy
on one side. These were the spiritual
conurbations illuminated always
by love’s breath; a colonising
of the far side of the mind
without loss of the openness of its spaces.

“Sonata in X”, *Mass for Hard Times*