

### **CHAPTER THREE: THE SPIRITUAL QUEST FOR WALES**

I have looked long at this land,  
Trying to understand  
My place in it.

"Those Others" (*Tares*)

Known as the angry old man of Wales, Thomas's relationship with his country was very much a love-hate relationship. He loved her people, but could not stand their ways. He loved her landscape, but loathed the destruction left by modernisation. The poet flagrantly stated in "Those Others" (*Tares*), "I [found] / This hate's for my own kind, / For men of the Welsh race". But it was in Wales that Thomas's spiritual quest was conducted; this was the place where he searched for a higher sense of spiritual awakening and purpose. In his lifetime, Thomas wrote concerning various aspects of Wales – her language, people, culture, lifestyle, beliefs, and the English intrusion, interruption, interference and infiltration into all these areas. He outlined his themes as "the hill country of Wales; the Welsh political and social existence; the natural world; the struggle

between time and eternity; [and] the struggle between the reason and the emotions” (*Selected Prose* 109). His was a voice “warning, criticizing, urging higher ideals” (Brown, 1993a, 197). Thomas feared “the intrusion of godless elsewhere into a sacred Wales” (Heptonstall). Thus, his poetry found “its life amidst contingent things – farmers, a parish, the survival of a language, the effects of science, the life of birds, [and] retreating landscapes” (W. Davies, 1993, 191).

W. Davies comments further that Thomas was “Wales’s own, out-of-synch ‘Movement’” (1993, 182). “Out-of-synch” probably refers to the fact that Thomas’s ‘fight’ for a preserved and uncorrupted Wales was far-reaching, even eccentric. To Thomas, Wales was “that shrinking area where nature [was] not wholly tamed ... where the life of the imagination [was] still possible” (N. Thomas 13). Thomas believed strongly that the imagination played a vital part in venturing into this whole area of nature, one that was wild and free. This was the prerequisite to finding the *real* Wales.

Wales and the Welsh lifestyle held such a mystery for Thomas that he wanted to unearth her secrets and the secrets of her people. “The very source of Welsh life as it is today is here in the middle of these remote moorlands ... [a]nd it is places of this sort that the soul of the true Welshman is formed” (*Selected Prose* 47). To find “the soul of the true Welshman”, Thomas chose to live close to the peasants, where he worked in isolated parishes and served the Welsh people as their clergyman. To live near the mountains, according to Thomas, was “to be in touch with Eden, with lost childhood” (*Selected Prose* 105). To Thomas, Wales held the secret to life, so much so that it was as though Wales was holy ground. “Even God had a Welsh name” (“A Welsh Testament”, *Tares*).

Thomas was often direct and unkind when referring to Wales as a nation and a people. Although Welsh himself, his patriotic side was often subdued. To him, Wales had

“nothing vast to offer ... Except the waste of thought / Forming from mind erosion” (“A Welshman to Any Tourist”, *Song at the Year’s Turning*). He felt that the generation that he lived in was a destructive generation, one that left many things to technology, and forsook the good and wise ways of the past. In “Welsh Landscape” (*An Acre of Land*), he said,

You cannot live in the present,  
At least not in Wales ...  
There is no present in Wales,  
And no future;  
There is only the past.

Thomas communicated his awareness of a past that transcended and overtook the present. The past held the key to the future, but what Thomas saw was only a bleak future, because there was “the spilled blood / That went to the making of the wild sky” in Wales’s past (“Welsh Landscape”). He expressed bitter disgust with the people of a country rich only in myth and history and whose lives remained unhealthily directed and guarded by this myth and history. In Thomas’s poems on paintings in *Between Here and Now* (1981), he seemed to perceive Wales as a “loveless, lonely world rejecting the spiritual and embracing dark depravity” (J.A. Davies 227). This dark and gloomy side of Wales became almost an obsession for Thomas. While many only saw the picturesque hillsides and marshes of Wales, he also saw her depraved landscape, almost like an evil twin rearing its ugly head as a result of the careless development of the land. It was, thus, a difficult search for a spiritual Wales that Thomas ventured into, considering the ‘contamination’ and pollution she had undergone due to hasty development.

So we see that the struggle in Thomas was to appreciate Wales’s beauty while accepting her dark side. It seemed like a “clash between dream and reality” (*Selected Prose* 138). He called this dark side “the putrefying of a dead / Nation” (“Reservoirs”,

*Not That He Brought Flowers*); Wales had “a dead culture” (“Welsh History”, *An Acre of Land*). Thomas was definitely convinced of the idea and image of a dead or dying Wales. In “Welcome to Wales” (*Not That He Brought Flowers*), he invited all to

Come to Wales  
To be buried; the undertaker  
Will arrange it for you.  
... No one lives  
In our villages, ...  
Let us  
Quote you; our terms  
Are the lowest, and we offer,  
Dirt cheap, a place where  
It is lovely to lie.

Undeniably, it was definitely “lovely to lie” in Wales with her famed hills and landscape. But to Thomas, the Welsh were creating a decaying burial ground in the way technological advancements were overtaking simple lifestyles and age-old ways, making her “pain’s landscape” (“Tenancies”, *Not That He Brought Flowers*). The Wales Thomas surveyed, “far from being that tranquil place of birdsong, trees, and streams, [was] increasingly seen to be in actuality a spiritual and imaginative wasteland” (Brown, 1993a, 194).

This is seen especially in the volume *What is a Welshman?* (1974) which vividly describes Wales and her people. “In Wales there are / no crocodiles, but the tears / continue to flow” (“If You Can Call it Living”). It reflects a people so shallow and emotionally devoid that the tears that flow are crocodile tears. Although Wales’s past determines her future, what the past has left are merely places where tourists can “make [their] way / from monument to monument (“He Lies Down to be Counted”). Wales is unimpressive and un fascinating. “The history of Wales is now emphatically seen to be a history of failure” (Pugh 95). The people were “an impotent people, / Sick with



inbreeding” (“Welsh Landscape”, *An Acre of Land*). The Wales reflected in Thomas’s poems “seems claustrophobically small and small-minded” (Triggs).

It is starkly clear therefore, that with modernisation and industrialisation, Thomas found it harder and harder to preserve and praise the uncorrupted Welsh hills, and his poems spoke malevolently about the heavy industries that came from beyond Wales. It was precisely the growing urbanisation and development of the land that gave rise to the feelings of enmity in him. The fields to the idealistic Thomas were “symbols of that flowing in of food and inspiration and re-invigoration without which all towns must wither and die” (*Selected Prose* 58). The countryside formed and shaped the cities, and Thomas wanted to ensure that the people remembered this, lest they became town-worshippers. He felt that what the villages stood for was about to be tarnished by machines and technology. There was little that towns could offer – they had “flowerless streets”; but in the country, one could grow to be “patient and strong” (“The Evacuee”, *An Acre of Land*). Thomas lamented that he “hate[d] towns and so-called modern civilisation and all that they [stood] for” (Jenkins 81). The town was “malignant” (“Fair Day”, *Between Here and Now*), a place where “The people cannot translate / Beauty... / They sin in Welsh” (“On Tour”, *Pietà*).

From the earliest of his collections, the loathing and animosity for modernisation could clearly be detected. In “Cynddylan on a Tractor” (*An Acre of Land*), Thomas mocked the farmer for selling “his birthright for a mess of machinery” (Price 23):

Ah, you should see Cynddylan on a tractor.  
Gone the old look that yoked him to the soil;  
He’s a new man now, part of the machine,  
His nerves of metal and his blood oil.

Cynddylan has been transformed into a “new man”, replacing flesh and blood for “metal” and “oil”. Now, with his machine, he scatters the hens, empties the woods of

foxes, squirrels and jays, and does not hear the birds' song. No longer in tune with nature, he is "on a different fuel". This poem is "full of sardonic humour, a mirth that covers Mr. Thomas's contempt for the 'new' hill farmer" (Price 23). Nature no longer has an influence on the farmer. Such was the depth of Thomas's disapproval of technological modernisation and its negative effects. In "Earth" (*Tares*), he pointed out that there were "Men going forth on slow tractors / To turn the earth with hate in their hearts".

Almost ten years after "Cynddylan on a Tractor", Thomas's poems still reflected harsh disapproval of technological modernisation. "Too Late" (*Tares*) "articulates the evolution or revolution that has come about in the world of the countryman" (Savill 59). Here, Thomas's dream for the farmer was to "have seen [him] poor and in rags, / Rather than wealthy and not free". Thomas warned the hill farmer that the constraining and restricting forces of machinery would "destroy you and your race". Thomas reiterated this point that the machine's fuel, in "Lore" (*Tares*), was "human souls".

In another poem, "A Line from St. David's" (*The Bread of Truth*), the poet remarked that "Nature had invested all her gold / In the industry of the soil". It was the land that held the treasures to life. The modern cities held no mystery for Thomas; they were monotonous and rigid. He wished that we would "re-open our eyes to the price we pay for our so-called progress, and, at best, remind us where we truly belong" (*Selected Prose* 127).

Undeniably then, Thomas fought for recognition of the undisturbed, humble villages and the peasant life to be seen as the purest and most fulfilling. Different scenes of villages were painted in order to do this. This can firstly be seen in "The Village" (*Song at the Year's Turning*), where "So little happens" in a village that has "too few houses" and "Scarcely a street". Yet, the goings-on in this insignificant village are more

important and meaningful than any event. “Stay, then, village, for round you spins / On slow axis a world as vast / And meaningful as any poised / By great Plato’s solitary mind.” To Thomas, the lives of his parishioners in villages such as these all across Wales assumed a universal importance. In “Aside” (*Pietà*), Thomas admonished the farmer to “Take heart” because “Over you the planets [stood]”. The remote pasturelands held Truth and Life in them, while towns were nothing more than thieves of the spirit and character of man. The health and wealth of Wales became dependent upon “its possession of a sturdy, flourishing peasantry” (Wintle 219). Wales and her provincial dwellers became the central force of life for Thomas, and this force did not exist in towns. To Thomas, despite the many towns and cities the Welsh people had, they were “country folk at heart” (*Selected Prose* 58). It was no wonder that the life of the farmers attracted Thomas as much as it did.

In “Green Categories” (*Poetry for Supper*), Thomas described villages as places where “all [was] sure; / Things exist[ed] rooted in flesh, / Stone, tree and flower”. Even a quarter of a decade after penning those thoughts, Thomas’s views remained unchanged. The “village in the Welsh hills / [was] dust free / with no road out / but the one you came in by” (“Arrival”, *Later Poems*). Villages were self-enclosed and free of the pollution and modernisation that towns and cities were invariably linked to. To the farmer, Thomas assured that power “was always yours”, enabling the farmer and his ways to be “Rooted in the dark soil” (“Power”, *Poetry for Supper*). Nature held the embryonic beginnings of mankind.

Sadly, as time passed and generations changed, the village was no more a sought-after destination for living due to the chase after material wealth. Instead, “Death live[d] in this village, the ambulance plie[d] / back and fore” (“A Land”, *Welsh Airs*).

Modernisation slowly but surely crept into the lives of those who invited it and those who did not. All the beauty of the hills and the landscape and “all the pain / of beholding it emptied / of a people who were not worthy of it” (“Deprivation”, *Welsh Airs*) made Thomas feel deprived of a land and a people that could be much more than they were.

Finally, in Thomas’s *Experimenting with an Amen* (1986), “The seasons [flew]; / the flowers wither[ed]; / the leaves [lay] on the ground” (“Harvest End”). To him, the true Wales merely remained as a memory in his mind, as one “familiar ... with a song.” Now, “No sun / [rose] there, so there [was] no sun / to set” (“A Country”). In Thomas’s eyes, there was little for the people of Wales to remember of “The pain, [or] the beauty” (“Aim”) of Wales. The two things that could “redeem” their ignorance were “the beauty / And grace that trees and flowers labour[ed] to teach” but these were never the farmer’s; he had “shut [his] heart against them” (“Valediction”, *An Acre of Land*).

What, then, was Thomas trying to say about the peasant farmers? That there was no hope for improvement and an awakening of the soul? Perhaps so, since the farmer seemed adamant against change. Thomas reiterated in “Enigma” (*An Acre of Land*), that the “earth [was] beautiful” but the peasant was “blind / To it all”.

In “The Labourer” (*An Acre of Land*), the disillusioned poet commented that even after centuries, the labourer was still in “The same garments, frayed with light / Or seamed with rain”. He had been here “since life began”. The peasant farmers had worked on land inherited from their fathers and forefathers, spanning centuries. It was, therefore, difficult for them to accept change just as it was difficult for Thomas to instil a desire for change. Thomas struggled to love Wales and her people, but he still wished they would change their ways. He described them as “an inert people / who [had] never known either freedom or love” (“Saraband”, *Between Here and Now*). Thomas recognised in them a

“man like you”, but they were blinded “with tears / Of sweat of the bright star that [drew them] on” (“The Labourer”, *An Acre of Land*). He acknowledged that his hillmen were “subject[ed] to a thousand batterings and their silence [came] from patience, the acceptance of the fact that they must always struggle and always be beaten” (Price 22).

“Truth” (*The Bread of Truth*) presents another picture of the permanence of the peasantry:

He was in the field, when I set out.  
He was in the fields, when I came back.  
In between, what long hours,  
What *centuries* might have elapsed.  
Did he look up? (emphasis mine)

The farmer works tirelessly. The peasant is at one with nature, so much so that he is oftentimes barely distinguishable from the landscape:

This is his world, the hedge defines  
The mind's limits; only the sky  
Is boundless, and he never looks up;  
His gaze is deep in the dark soil,  
As are his feet. The soil is all;  
“Soil” (*An Acre of Land*)

The peasant has internalised his experience with the earth through intimate contact with the soil.

Yet for Thomas, something was missing in the hearts of the peasantry, and he believed this to be spiritual awakening. “In their reading of landscape the peasants [did] not find God at all; but neither [did] they find God in the chapel” (Shepherd 55). It was this situation that Thomas despaired of as he tried to instil a sense of God in the lives of the peasants.

This spiritual poverty was reflected in the Welsh hills. For all their physical beauty, the hills were “unrealistically always bare because they [were] emblematic of a spiritual condition. The poet [saw] without what he [had] within. The landscapes [were]

of the mind's eye, the mind's gallery" (Humphrey 167). Thus, the task of bringing spiritual awakening was a difficult and formidable one, as "the idea of a God of love [was] challenged by the harsh reality of life" (Shepherd 64). The severe challenges and huge demands of farm work left the farmers and their families with "little energy or inclination for anything more than the most rudimentary cultural or spiritual interests" (Jenkins 78). They were a sturdy people shaped by the forces of strenuous and necessary work and they had "laborious, constricted lives, harsh struggles for survival on infertile uplands" (Jenkins 78). They "work[ed] / In the wet fields and suffer[ed] pain / And loneliness" ("Priest and Peasant", *Song at the Year's Turning*). They "bent / For hours over their trade, / Speechless"; theirs was a harsh and hard life, and Thomas often felt that it was "not [his] part / To show them, like a meddler from the town" ("There", *Pietà*) the way to live or not to live.

Even in his later collections, for instance *Later Poems* (1983), that loathing for the country is still evident. He called Wales a "country / of failure, the rain / falling out of a black / cloud in gold pieces there / [were] none to gather" ("The Bush"). Ironically, Thomas chose this very bleak land to journey in search of hope. Though he often failed in this journey, he never gave up. He continued to search for a spiritual shelter in Wales. The poet returned "constantly to this well-worn patch – the fixed life of the hill-farmer – in search of some assured certitude about his own attitudes to mid-twentieth-century urban civilization" (R.G. Thomas 83).

Unsurprisingly then, while Thomas wrote bitterly about some aspects of Wales, he wrote passionately about others. In "The Small Window" (*Not That He Brought Flowers*), he remarked, "In Wales there are jewels / To gather, but with the eye / Only." Thomas clearly recognised the vast beauty of Wales. But this wealth, was "for the few /

And chosen". It is the gathering of these jewels embedded within the Welsh wasteland that will be attempted next.

Both the ugly and the beautiful sides of Wales became a paramount source of inspiration for many of Thomas's poems. She was not only a geological inspiration for him, but also a spiritual one. At first sight, she was a "romantic-looking" country (*Selected Prose* 20). The hills "had grace, [and] the light clothed them / With wild beauty" ("Valediction", *An Acre of Land*). This land of agricultural bounty and green pastures had sheep grazing, "Arranged romantically in the usual manner" ("The Welsh Hill Country", *An Acre of Land*). This was a land where man, beast and nature all made up pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of life. Although the peasant farmers contributed "grimly to the accepted pattern" ("The Welsh Hill Country"), their hardships continued to weave the intricacies of life. It was where God the Artist never stopped to rest, as described by Thomas in "The View from the Window" (*Poetry for Supper*). While the farmers worked at producing agricultural harvests, his desire was for them to sow on spiritual ground to reap spiritual benefits as well. Unfortunately, this was a task Thomas found unpleasantly difficult.

The peasant farmers that Thomas wrote about were the ordinary, everyday people seen in farms and pasturelands in rural Wales. Thomas called them people who were "attuned to the old traditional life of the earth" (Jenkins 79). They were "uneducated, inarticulate men, and their utterance must be created for them" by him (Morris 49). It was often not a pretty picture that was painted of them. Stevenson outlines Thomas's dilemma well:

That the Anglican priest was articulate and the hill-farmers mute meant that, in reaching out to them, he could try to speak for them. And yet, paradoxically, this poet's romantic vision gave him to understand that education and

articulation (especially in English) was itself a form of corruption. So it was that Thomas found himself torn between revulsion at the passive insensitivity of his hill-farmers, and admiration (eventually reverence) for the strength of their innocence. (46)

It is obvious that while Thomas did not always have kind things to say about the peasant folk, he identified their worth and only voiced honest views. Dr. Pennar Davies, in a broadcast in 1946, commented: "R.S. Thomas [saw] far more uncouthness in the men of the Welsh hills than I have ever been able to detect" (Savill 54). Thomas wrote bluntly in "A Priest to His People" (*The Stones of the Field*), "How I have hated you for your irreverence, your scorn even / Of the refinements of art and the mysteries of the Church ... / You are curt and graceless ... [with] unhallowed movements". Yet, these "curt and graceless" subjects were the very ones the irascible Thomas admired – he began by calling them "Men of the hills, wantoners, men of Wales". The word "wantoners" tucked awkwardly between two powerful descriptions of "men of the hills" and "men of Wales" reflected Thomas's opposing duality of emotion for the people of Wales. Truly, it was a love-hate relationship.

Nevertheless, in the same poem, Thomas admitted that it was in those "unhallowed movements" that life was uncontaminated and purest. Thomas rhetorically asked, "what brushwork could equal / The artistry of your dwelling on the bare hill?" Where in the beginning he regarded the farmers in a harsh light, he later praised them for their contribution to nature. The poet-priest worked with grim determination to embrace the peasant lifestyle. To him, though the farmer was slow and dull in many things, and his lifestyle uncouth, "the truth's here, / Closer than the world [would] confess, / In this bare bone of life that I pick[ed]" ("Truth", *The Bread of Truth*). Thomas pursued "a wholly different direction to the one ostensibly indicated" (Wintle 237).



It is clear now that in kinder moments, Thomas registered and acknowledged the worth of the peasants. These peasants are “also ... human” despite their “sinking garments” and “aimless grin[s]”; insignificant as they seem, their names are also “written in the Book of Life” (“Affinity”, *The Stones of the Field*). In fact, it was for their sake that Thomas wrote – for the “many others still managing to hold out” (*Selected Prose* 21). Due to the rich surroundings of the peasantry, Thomas believed that they had “a green heritage more rich and rare / Than a queen’s emerald or an untouched maid” (“The Airy Tomb”, *The Stones of the Field*).

It is in this poem, “The Airy Tomb”, that the idea of peasantry having ‘treasures’ is caught. This rather long poem outlines the story of Twm, a dunce in school. Twm “could write and spell / No more than the clouds could or the dribbling rain”. He was an example of what Thomas described as “those that life happens to. / They didn’t ask to be born / In those bleak farmsteads, but neither / Did they ask not” (“There”, *Pietà*). Being slow at school in “The Airy Tomb”, Twm would instead learn “what none could teach but the hill people / In that cold country.” Twm’s “eyes found a new peace / Tracing the poems, which the rooks wrote in the sky”. This dunce was smarter than he looked, and Thomas affirmed this. The hills were able to teach man several things, and because the peasant recognised this, his learning was “secret ... innocent of books” (“Memories”, *An Acre of Land*).

Thomas also believed that “life is the result of the reciprocal relation of man and environment. The countryman gains in stature from the grandeur of the surrounding landscape; the landscape in turn is a fitting setting for the simple human dignity of its inhabitants” (*Selected Prose* 124). Simply put, what man sows, he shall reap. To Thomas, to sow in nature was better than anything else. The peasant attested to this as well,

because twenty years after “The Airy Tomb”, in “The Face” (*Pietà*), the farmer’s ploughing remained endless, “as though autumn / Were the one season he knew”, and “He will go on”. The farmers, thus, came to “epitomize the rugged resilience and individualism which Thomas most value[d], away from contemporary, mechanized, technological, mass society” (Brown, 1998).

Another volume of poems that portrays the Welsh peasants in an enlightened manner is the later volume *Welsh Airs* (1987). There is a sense of unity between man and nature and the farmers are described as “men / who live[d] at the edges / of vast space” and their “minds / [were] the minds of children” (“West Coast”). These were men whose “innocence [was] tied to the earth, to those edges of vast space” (J.C. Morgan 63). Their passions have been “incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature” (Jenkins 85).

While there were a handful of poems that highlighted the beauty of the natural surroundings of Wales, landscape to Thomas was merely secondary – like a painting board for the more important inhabitants of this landscape to be highlighted. It was more vital to Thomas that the peasants had depth of personality within them and he sought to reveal this. One instance can be seen in “Peasant Greeting” (*The Stones of the Field*). The peasant’s expression, feelings and intention are “All packed into a single gesture.” A simple wave from the peasant can represent a million things, and a picture, or in this case, the farmer’s countenance, definitely speaks louder than words. They may be unrefined expressions, but meaningful ones nonetheless. The landscape was “epitomized in men and their houses and their acre of land. [Thomas’s] interest [was] in figures in a landscape, not landscape for itself” (Humphrey 164).

One such figure that Thomas gave special attention to was Iago Prytherch, an ordinary character made extraordinary by the poet. It is impossible to discuss Thomas's subject on peasants without discussing Prytherch, a character he created that has followed him through many volumes and collections. While getting inspiration from the hill farmers in Wales, Thomas specifically focused on Prytherch to be his constant companion.

We are first introduced to Prytherch in a somewhat uncomplimentary manner in Thomas's first collection of poems, *The Stones of the Field* (1946). "Iago Prytherch his name, / ... Just an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills" ("A Peasant"). The name Iago, "strange to English ears ... simply means James" (Stevenson 39). His work was simple and straightforward enough – he "pen[ned] a few sheep in a gap of cloud", and he was "at night ... fixed in his chair / Motionless". We are also told about there being "something frightening in the vacancy of his mind." Perhaps Prytherch had such a monotonous and scheduled life that there was a part of him that did not need the mind to function; he was merely on 'automatic mode'. Phillips queries whether this vacancy is due to the peasant being "numbed by the harshness of his labours" (3). Has labour desensitised the farmer's mind, thus causing his thoughts to focus automatically only on the farm and the land? This seems to be the case. Also, the vacancy could be "a certain disquiet over the spiritual emptiness of his mind" (Abbs 104).

Nevertheless, Thomas concluded the poem by praising Prytherch: "Remember him, then, for he, too is a winner of wars, / Enduring like a tree under the curious stars". Prytherch, too has had his battles to fight, and the "heavens themselves are interested in this lonely peasant" (Wintle 188), as the word "curious" suggests.

There is something in Prytherch that commands respect and praise, and by giving this peasant a name, Thomas draws our attention to the fact that here is a man with feelings; he is not merely one out of the many dull farmers scattered throughout Wales. Prytherch is the “prototype” of human endurance and “an impregnable fortress” (“A Peasant”, *The Stones of the Field*). In a later collection of poems, *Poetry for Supper*, Thomas asserted that Prytherch’s soul was “made strong / By the earth’s incense, the wind’s song” (“Absolution”). Here, “however faintly, beats the old heart of Wales ... They [people like Iago] [were] hardy and extremely individual people” (*Selected Prose* 24). Triggs praises Prytherch “for his brute stoicism in the face of adversity.”

Nevertheless, even though Prytherch represented “the old heart of Wales”, there were occasions that Thomas wished for some new blood and spirit to run there. In “Iago Prytherch” (*The Stones of the Field*), Thomas remarked that should Prytherch “dream [his] dream, and after the earth’s laws / Order [his] life and faith”, then he should be the “first man of the new community”. Thomas was trying to persuade Prytherch towards a fresh way of living. He struggled with the fact that while he lived among a people who were tenacious and hardworking, they were without visions and dreams for the future. Phillips quotes Thomas as having felt that the peasant life “was something not quite part of the order of things” (56). Again, we are reminded of “the great / Draught of nature sweeping the skull”. The fight of “the vacancy of the mind” seems to be hopeless since “science and art, ... [have] no chance / To install themselves” in Prytherch’s mind (“Iago Prytherch”, *Poetry for Supper*), suggesting a lack in educational advancement.

In “Invasion on the Farm” (*Song at the Year’s Turning*), Prytherch says, “I am Prytherch. Forgive me. I don’t know / What you are talking about; your thoughts flow / Too swiftly for me”. Here, Prytherch admits his weakness and slowness of mind. It

seems cruel for Thomas to draw the character of Prytherch as one who is dull and dumb, unable to catch up with the changes of the world. But on this “dark figure” Thomas’s poems made their “long shadow”, as if falling “coldly across the page” (“Iago Prytherch”, *Poetry for Supper*). Prytherch has evolved to become a “true poetic symbol” (R.G. Thomas 83).

Moreover, Morris proposes that Prytherch became an “*alter ego* for the poet” (50), “part of the poet’s mind” (R.G. Thomas 83). The challenges and difficulties that Thomas confronted were channelled into and transferred to Prytherch, making Prytherch the “spokesman, confidant [and] opponent” (Morris 50) As Phillips puts it, “[t]he reason why the poet [was] able to celebrate the peasant’s endurance, show us his cries of despair, [was] that that despair [was] not to be found only in the peasant’s experience. There [were] moments when the same despair consume[d] the priest too” (57). “Iago as symbol consciously [became] another side of the poet’s own mind” (R.G. Thomas 84). Prytherch was Thomas’s mirror and an emotional barometer. While others saw Prytherch as a mere farmer, to Thomas he was “the man / Who more than all directed [his] slow / Charity where there was need” (“The Dark Well”, *Tares*). Thomas found comfort in knowing that Prytherch acted as his conscience, telling and directing him what to say, do and write. It can certainly be conjectured that Prytherch influenced much of Thomas’s spiritual journey.

Thus, while Prytherch symbolised dullness and dejection, his role in society and in nature was imperative. His “hard job in the fields [became] emblematic of the embrittlement of the human condition” (PassAnnanti). It was as if Prytherch possessed dual qualities – that of being witless yet influential. In “Which?” (*Tares*), Thomas questioned whether Prytherch “was the scholar / Of the fields’ pages he turned more

slowly / Season by season, or nature's fool, / Born to blur with his moist eye". The question Thomas posed here was whether Prytherch tended to the fields intelligently like a "scholar", or whether he went about the business of tending pasturelands ignorant of what was happening. Thomas seemed to wonder whether this dullness had unknowingly allowed technology to penetrate into the peasant lifestyle.

So we see that Thomas gave contrasting views of Prytherch. The peasant's hard work redeemed him from his slowness of mind. This undeniably made Prytherch an asset to Thomas's works. In "Servant" (*The Bread of Truth*), Prytherch is described as a servant who turns "the fields' pages / So patiently" at every turn of the season, knowing the times by reading the seasons. In this aspect, Prytherch was a servant because he served as a sounding board for all of Thomas's "questionings and doubts". It is as if Prytherch's sole purpose was to patiently tend to the fields in all seasons in order for Thomas to glean truths about hill farmers and their lifestyles.

In the roles that Prytherch played, one thing is certain: he has developed from a mere poetic character into "a symbol of something greater" (*Selected Prose* 167). But oftentimes, Thomas questioned himself whether Prytherch was real at all: "was he a real man"? ("Which?", *Tares*). Thomas appeared unsure of his own motives in developing this character. Initially Prytherch was merely "an amalgam of some farmers [Thomas] used to see at work on the Montgomeryshire hillsides" (*Selected Prose* 167). But eventually, Prytherch evolved to become more than a mere "amalgam". Prytherch, "through the years came to represent a good deal more than a rural type" (Stevenson 40). Like the rest of the hill farmers, Prytherch was not aware of the vital role he played in portraying the soul of Wales and the "artistic perspective" into which he has walked, but he was "dignified by it in the consciousness of the reader" (N. Thomas 10).

In time, Prytherch became less visible. Nevertheless, there was almost always a reference to him in most of Thomas's collections. The peasant was used to express Thomas's uncertainty during times of war and, after that, his frustration with the speed of modern life. It is irrefutable that Thomas found a refuge in Prytherch, knowing that while the whole world around him revolved and evolved in the modern, advanced way that it did, Prytherch would perpetually be that hill farmer, unchanged and unchangeable. Prytherch's world would perpetually be "the same world as before" ("For the Record", *Pietà*). His "lot [was] to seem / Stationary in traffic so fast" ("Aside", *Pietà*). Nothing has affected him, and sadly, he has affected nothing: "There [was] no forward and no back / In the fields, only the year's two / Solstices, and patience between" ("Aside"). Time has essentially been routine and predictable, making Prytherch monotonous and predictable.

Prytherch symbolised so much of Wales that when he was 'gone' or 'dead' in the poem "Gone?" (*Frequencies*), Thomas wondered if people would be affected:

Will they say on some future  
occasion, looking over the flogged acres  
of ploughland: This was Prytherch country?  
Nothing to show for it now.

In spite of all the importance placed on him, Prytherch diminished to a mere shadow and image.

Another theme that is synonymous with Thomas, although not as frequently mentioned as Prytherch, is Abercuawg. Here is another instance of the poet making a common place uncommon, just like he did with Prytherch. The name is taken from "a place name in a mediaval Welsh poem" (Morris 59), but no one knows where the place is. It was a place created by Thomas to represent several things. It represented his ideal picture of what Wales should be, a reflection of his dream of a perfect Wales. At the

same time, it was his fantasyland to which he escaped when Wales failed him. There were but a handful of poems written about this place, and Thomas wrote about it more lengthily in his prose.

One poem stands out as most important – a poem entitled “Abercuawg” (*Frequencies*). Thomas began the poem as if he were able to read the questions in the minds of his readers, “Abercuawg! Where is it? / Where is Abercuawg, that / place where the cuckoos sing?” That question rings loudly and remains unanswered until today. To Thomas, Abercuawg was a place that “was there without being there” (*Selected Prose* 164). It became a metaphor that fused Thomas’s search for the real Wales and for God. Just like his spiritual search for God, Thomas’s spiritual search for the soul of Wales was both challenging and often unfruitful. Abercuawg was illusive and transitional. It was “not here now, but there” (“Abercuawg”). One never arrived because it was at an “indefinable point”. He admitted that it was merely an “incarnation of a concept”. As Abercuawg did not actually exist, Thomas apparently was stating that this search would never ever really end. The focus was not on the arriving, but on the process of becoming. This was similar to his search for God, where the focus was not on the finding, but on the process of searching. To him, it was a way to “become conscious of what is right through its absence” (*Selected Prose* 172).

To Thomas, Abercuawg, or the idea of Abercuawg, created waves of excitement and inspiration. The mystery of Abercuawg and the impossibility of reaching it were reflective of Thomas’s view of a perfect Wales, or of a prayer-answering God. He passionately stated:



Nothing cannot be conceived ... Try. You cannot. There is always something present. Fall back on language. Call out: NOTHING! It is totally meaningless. But shout: Abercuawg! And the echoes begin to awake. (*Selected Prose* 172)

So, while very little was written about Abercuawg in his poems, the fact that he was a seeker of this place suggests to us that there was great importance placed on it. Abercuawg became that which Wales was not and could not be, that is a place free of spiritual and physical desolation. It was a place where he looked “as though through a clear / window” (“Abercuawg”).

Phillip quotes Thomas as saying that “as a Welshman [he did] not see any meaning in [his] life if there [was] no such place as Abercuawg, a town or village where the cuckoos sing” (92). Its value lay “in the spiritual and imaginative effort which the individual [made] in struggling to achieve the ideal” (Brown, 1993b, 167). It was through Abercuawg that Thomas clung on to an ideal of simple living.

In conclusion, Thomas has brought us with him to journey through a country that he felt was in itself confusing and disintegrated. Wintle states that “[b]oth the history and the literature of Wales strongly suggest a people blown off course, culturally at odds with their dominant English neighbours, but often equally at odds among themselves” (73). Unconsciously, the Welsh searched long and hard for an identity to call their own. But at the same time, they were integrating alien cultures into their daily lifestyles. For Thomas, “the landscapes and people of Wales have been a fruitful source of poems” (Morris 60). He attempted to show the way towards a new and pure Wales with a language and culture to call her own. Yet, we recognise the conflict within Thomas’s own heart, which was that he loved Wales but suspected or knew that she did not have the answers to all his questions.

Similarly, he loved the Welsh peasantry and parishioners, but seemed to hold back his total devotion to them. Unsure, doubtful and skeptical of their response and actions, Thomas kept himself in a safe place where he would not be totally devastated should the people of Wales disappoint him, and disappoint him they did, by being uncouth, unpolished and unspiritual. His solution was this, that “[i]n an unspiritual world, traces of spirit are clung to with grim determination” (Wintle 291). Just as he held on to what little traces of God that he caught, Thomas held on with “grim determination” to the belief that Wales had spiritual and physical treasures to offer to anyone who would take the time to search and ask for them. Thomas’s experience in the poem below is a mirror for each person seeking for his or her own Wales:

I am a seeker  
in time for that which is  
beyond time, that is everywhere  
and nowhere; no more before  
than after, yet always  
about to be.

“Abercuawg” (*Frequencies*)

## **CHAPTER FOUR: THE SPIRITUAL QUEST FOR SELF**

Moral responsibility flows from faith and a love of the beautiful,  
a desire to find the same order and beauty in man.  
(Schmidt 762)

It is difficult to state whether R.S. Thomas was primarily a priest or a poet. But in both roles, his desire was to find “faith and a love of the beautiful” not only in man, but in God and in Wales. Thomas’s search in life was one that was individual, yet communal, as if there was a “moral responsibility” that he had to fulfil.

This chapter studies the intricacies and weavings of the poet-priest relationship. As a priest, he perceived his task to be that of a mediator of God to the Welsh people, from the “implicit position of God’s deputy in Wales” (Bedient 209). He sought “to incarnate reality, and he himself [became] the medium through which that reality may pass: if poetry is the sunlight, the poet is the window” (Adkins 255). His role was to “mediate God to his people” (Jenkins 87), to break “The live bread for the starved folk” (“Bread”, *Poetry for Supper*). For Thomas, writing poetry was a way of pondering

questions about God and his own role as priest “with unflinching honesty” (Rosenthal). Triggs confirms this: Thomas’s “duty as a priest [was] to minister to [the people’s] spiritual needs, and his duty as a poet [was] to record their sufferings.”

The overlap of roles inadvertently affected his writings. These roles converged and complemented each other on many occasions. Each involved its “own tensions, its own disciplines, its own remorse” (Wintle 301). Wilson quotes Thomas describing the two vocations: “It’s easy here ... If you let sleeping dogs lie, you can get by doing the work in a normal way – visiting the sick, looking after the young people. In return I get peace of mind and time to write poetry. You’ve just got to put up with not being able to take the people to a more advanced state” (Wilson 70). Thomas certainly did not take himself too seriously as a clergyman.

Thomas tried to make sense of and make a connection between the natural world of Wales and the spiritual world around him. In “This to Do” (*Pietà*), Thomas wrote,

I have this that I must do  
One day ...  
    go down into the green  
Darkness to search for the door  
To myself in dumbness and blindness.

Here, we journey together with Thomas in search of “the door”. It is often a journey conducted in darkness, due to “dumbness and blindness”. But nonetheless, we open “a small window into the inner sanctum of his hardly won faith” (R.G. Thomas 88).

Thomas said this of his conception of the poet-priest:

My work as a poet has to deal with the presentation of imaginative truth. ... As a priest I am committed to the ministry of the word and the ministry of the sacraments. ... In presenting the Bible to my congregation I am presenting imaginative interpretation of reality. (Abbs 103)

With regard to poetry-writing, Thomas wrote in his collection of *Selected Prose*, “Kierkegaard defines a poet as one who suffers. It is in his anguish that he opens his mouth, but the sound which comes out is so sweet to the ears of his listeners that they press him to sing again, that is to suffer still further” (202). For Thomas, being a poet was not child’s play, but an emptying of himself into the hands of his readers in order for them to judge and assess the value of his “anguish” and how “sweet” his poems actually sound. Then, with coercion from his readers, he would “sing again”, emptying himself repeatedly and placing his private self in a very vulnerable position. It appears as if the poet was “both free and constrained, and it [was] the acceptance of this dilemma that [gave] Thomas’s later poetry its particular character” (Vicary 92). His views on his subject matter were not always the easiest to digest, but they were honest views, often to the point of brutal honesty.

In an interview with Lethbridge, Thomas remarked, “it’s not my responsibility as a poet to solve the Welsh problem, or to solve man’s economic problems or even his spiritual problems. But on that latter subject, I can make a contribution, I admit, since a poem is made out of words, the words can form part of a solution, I suppose” (37). Thomas saw poetry as a solution, and sometimes even as a temporary escape from the difficulties of life. Literature, to Thomas, was “the communication of thought and emotion at the highest and the most articulate level. It [was] the supreme human statement” (Thomas & Barnie 34). Being a poet, Thomas connected the world of nature to the spiritual condition of man; it was “part of a solution”. In “The Game” (*Frequencies*), Thomas urged his readers to:

Look over the edge  
of the universe and you see  
your own face staring  
at you back, as it does  
in a pool.

To Thomas, the answers to life's big and small questions were in the simple reflection of a pool, that is in humankind. The answers are all within us. Thomas's poetry also plays the role of "a looking glass, reflecting and creating a self that is 'familiar' to, but not identical with, the poet, and not under his control" (Lloyd). Poetry becomes an act of drawing on deep springs of emotions beyond the poet's conscious control and "The rewards / are there" ("The Game"). A poet "must take the words as one finds them, and make them sing" (*Selected Prose* 81).

Thomas used words as tools of expression, sometimes expressing joy but often expressing frustration as well. He was a poet of search and his journey was "a circular one" (Deane 218). This is obvious from the fact that he was almost always talking about the same issues – God, Wales, and the peasants. Thomas saw that his task was "to show the true glory of life" and Brown describes him as endeavouring "to raise the eyes of the people to a higher ideal, to make them aware that even the things of their ordinary, everyday lives have significance" (1993a, 188). His was a task to unearth gems of truth from everyday life and reveal these to the people. As a poet, Thomas wished to "elevate man ... and life, and the earth" (Brown, 1993a, 188).

In "Henry James" (*Frequencies*), Thomas pointed out that "Richness is in the ability / of poverty to conceal itself." Thomas chose to pick up life's poverties and adorn them in such a manner that they emerged as rich truths of life. W. Davies describes Thomas's act of "[d]istilling huge argument into pellucid statement [as] the very genius of his style" (1993, 201). Thomas gleaned jewels in poetry that was "largely concerned

with states of doubt, loss, abandonment [and] absence" (Vicary 91). He addressed life's challenges and did not whitewash them: "Art / is not life ... but the motionless / image of itself on a fast- / running surface with which life / tries constantly to keep up" ("Return", *Later Poems*). Art cannot replace life. Thomas sought to look beyond the art of poetry in order to bring out the real splendour and glory of life and to record all of life's "richness, wonder and strangeness" (*Selected Prose* 113). He was constantly brought to "the bottomless / water that [was] the soul's glass" ("This One", *Experimenting with an Amen*). This is reflective of the never-ending journey that life is. In "The Window" (*Experimenting with an Amen*), this search for the self would require one

to put out his hand  
... to come up against  
glass; to break it is  
to injure himself.

The act of breaking out to discover oneself is not an easy or painless one. The possibility of injury is high. It is also not always a clear and straightforward discovery. "There [were] / times," reflected Thomas in "Retirement" (*Experimenting with an Amen*), "even the mirror / [was] misted as by one breathing / over my shoulder." For him, when the final destination was blurred, the "pilgrimage itself must be answer enough" (Davis, 1993a, 124).

Thomas's search included journeys to places within and beyond Wales. However, the inadequacy of the external journey to answer the questions the poet had was glaringly obvious. Furthermore, the physical journey played a lesser role as compared to the journey of the mind: "Is the world / large? Are there areas uncharted / by the imagination?" ("Travels", *Frequencies*). The mind allowed the poet to travel to places he could never physically reach where "the tree of poetry / ... [was] eternity wearing / the green leaves of time" ("Prayer", *Ingrowing Thoughts*). Like leaves of a tree, poetry is

always changing and transient, and never permanent and stagnant. Yet, poetry is enveloped in a sense of the eternal. Thomas constantly had a concern, reflected especially in his prose writing “with the poet’s almost irresistible need to justify and define his own work, to himself as much as to others” (Jenkins 77).

The spiritual condition Thomas experienced often reflected the spiritual condition of the environment around him, somewhat like a spiritual barometer. Undoubtedly, as Thomas wrote about the things around him – the peasants, Wales, the mysterious God, and his family, his secret fears and frustrations found their voice. Schmidt notes this: “The poet-clergyman of the early poems gives way to a man who writes now as a clergyman, and now as a poet: different voices” (761).

Bedient describes Thomas as a “natural poet” who “never tires of speaking of what is around him” (Vicary 90). We get an idea not only of how he viewed society, but also of what society really was like. Thomas observed this concerning his peasant parishioners,

I have taxed your ignorance of rhyme and sonnet, ...  
But I know, as I listen, that your speech has in it  
The source of all poetry, clear as a rill  
Bubbling from your lips.

“A Priest to His People”, *The Stones of the Field*

Where previously Thomas perceived the peasants as ignorant, he soon realised that there was poetry in the soul of the peasants. In these seemingly uninspiring subjects, Thomas gained his greatest inspiration.

Jenkins describes Thomas as “a nature poet whose fundamental interest is in man” (85). To Thomas, each man was “a traveller / with the moon’s halo / above him, who has arrived / after long journeying where he / began” (“Arrival”, *Later Poems*). Each requires and is grateful for an attentive listener to the story he or she has to tell. As Thomas stated,



"I play on a small pipe, a little aside from the main road. But thank you for listening"  
(Phillips 20).

Thomas referred to the role of the poet in several of his poems. In his earlier poems, as in "The Cure" (*Poetry for Supper*), there were certain infirmities that depended "solely on a poet's cure." But, other than being the doctor, "most poets / [were] their own patients, compelled to treat / Themselves first; their complaint being / Peculiar always." Some of Thomas's own "complaints" are seen in his writings. He considered the difficulties of writing poetry. "He never could decide what to write / About",

He tried truth; but the pen's scalpel tip  
Was too sharp; ...  
He tried love; slowly the blood congealed  
Like dark flowers saddening a field.  
"Composition", *Poetry for Supper*

The capacity to write with greater honesty and directness became marred by the difficulties arising when writing about things closest to his heart. The "pen's scalpel tip" drew words even from his very soul. There was "the long toil / That [went] like blood to the poem's making" ("Poetry for Supper").

The long toil of poetry-writing shaped Thomas to become a quiet introvert in the eyes of the outside world, shunning the advancements of the modern world. Phillips quotes him as saying, "I'm a solitary. I'm a nature mystic; and silence and slowness and bareness have always appealed" (p. xv). This silence and bareness are obvious in his writings. In "Inside" (*Later Poems*), he was his "own geology". Within him "stalactite and stalagmite, / ideas have formed and become / rigid". In a "cold and locationless / cloud we call truth, It / [was] where [he thought]". The mind of the poet seemed "locked in the painful complexities of his awareness of contemporary tensions" (Jenkins 76). This is apparent because while Thomas lived in an age of knowledge and information

overload, he turned to the idea that true genius was born from a seeming nothingness – “locationless”. It is as if “a blank becomes the sum total of knowledge” (Herman 149). The source is unknown and “poetry arises from the tension between the poet’s vision and belief, and the reality he is compelled to observe” (Jenkins 76).

In “To a Young Poet” (*The Bread of Truth*), Thomas confessed that each poet would not find approval “in that slower / World of the poet”; the poet would be “just coming / To sad manhood”. Nevertheless, poetry teaches the poet to ponder deeply on issues of the heart. For Thomas, this action would lead one to realise that maturity was connected with the ability to think analytically. The end product could be “sad manhood”. Perhaps “the act of concealing the wounds of life is [in] the transformation of those wounds into poetry” (Lloyd).

In “After Jericho” (*Frequencies*), Thomas advised the poet:

Smile, poet,  
among the ruins of a vocabulary  
you blew your trumpet against.  
It was a conscript army; your words,  
every one of them, are volunteers.

Words are a poet’s weaponry, almost as if in a Jericho Wall-like battle and when used well, they become a poet’s volunteers. The poet is “the supreme manipulator of metaphor” (“Introduction”, *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, 8). A clear example of this metaphor is detected in “The Listener in the Corner” (*The Way of It*): “slowly / a web is spun ... as minds ... / swing themselves to and fro.” The metaphor of the web shows “Thomas’s view on the interconnectedness of all things, and evidence of a divine presence and inspiration in the structure of the universe” (Astley 79). Thomas’s metaphors were powerful, allowing readers to interpret what he was saying at a personal level.

Poetry allowed Thomas to reach people's minds where simple prose would not have succeeded. In "Adagio" (*Later Poems*), the poet had to press forward although he was not inspired to write, as he stood "beneath leafless trees". While words are tools and volunteers used by the poet, often, language is inadequate to express the poet's feelings. Nevertheless, the poems Thomas considered best came to "him quickly; if he [had] to fight for words they tend[ed] to be less successful" (Nightingale 34). Thus, "Pages that were once white / carry the poet's rubric" ("Selah!", *Later Poems*). It is the poems that are short but apt and precise which capture the essence of Thomas as a poet of the twentieth century, as seen below:

His first ship; his last poem;  
And between them what turbulent acres  
Of sea or land with always the flesh ebbing  
In slow waves over the salt bones.

But don't be too hard; so to have written  
Even in smoke on such fierce skies,  
Or to have brought one poem safely to harbour  
From such horizons is not now to be scorned.

"Sailor Poet", *Poetry for Supper*

Bishop Dr. Barry Morgan, the Bishop of Llandaff attests, "you cannot really understand [Thomas's] poetry unless you also understand his priesthood. ... By that I mean that his poetry grew out of his ministry amongst people and his struggle to apprehend the Living God. It was his vocation that inspired his poetry." Undoubtedly, some of Thomas's best poems resulted from a search for meaning in his personal spiritual life and the lives of his parishioners. Thomas saw the spiritual predicament of mankind and named this the "mind's failure to explain itself" ("Balance", *Frequencies*).

Language is essential for both the poet and the priest. But, language was what Thomas found to be painfully spare. In "H'm" (*H'm*), Thomas attempted to portray a priest's struggle in a seemingly typical church service:

and one said  
speak to us of love  
and the preacher opened  
his mouth and the word God  
fell out so they tried  
again speak to us  
of God then but the preacher  
was silent.

In the poem, the preacher seems voiceless in his delivery, and is unable to fulfil his congregation's request. While we read that the preacher is "silent", the poem in itself is loaded with meaning, reflecting what Thomas must have felt while serving his parishioners who were the hard, ruddy peasants who knew nothing of form, style and socially accepted behaviour. He too, like the preacher of "H'm", was filled with intention to speak to them, but words failed him. "For the failure of language / there is no redress" ("The Combat", *Laboratories of the Spirit*). The reason for his silence or non-speech could be many, and this silence was given voice when Thomas wrote as a poet. The adventure with language is likened to "impossible journeys / to the far side of the self" because communication often fails ("The New Mariner", *Between Here and Now*). Critic W.V. Davis quotes A.M. Allchin in describing Thomas as raising "the question of the relationship between poetry and the Christian faith in its most acute form" (1993a, 110).

Brown describes man's spiritual existence as "the shadow man casts on the screen of eternity" (1993a, 197). Thomas constantly sought for a higher level of spiritual existence among his parishioners in the hope that they would receive revelation concerning the existence of an eternal reality outside the boundaries and hedges of their farms and lands. This was definitely a formidable task, likened to the journey "Of the priest over his slow path / Skyward" ("Encounter", *The Bread of Truth*). Thomas attempted to interest his parishioners in such a journey, but the Welsh peasants were not exactly people interested in things spiritual. When he was "not attempting to change the

peasants, he [was] thus aspiring to be what they [were]. The truth [was] that he [did] not know what to make of them” (Bedient 214). Thus, it was with directness that Thomas wrote in “A Priest to His People” (*The Stones of the Field*),

You will forgive, then, my initial hatred,  
My first intolerance of your uncouth ways,  
You who are indifferent to all that I can offer,  
Caring not whether I blame or praise.

He was hardly the mild-mannered clergyman. His bluntness concerning the peasant farmers in his poetry only stirred him further to attempt to change them. Their dullness towards spiritual things evoked in Thomas a burning desire to awaken them from deep spiritual sleep.

One example of this desire is seen in “The Fisherman” (*Not That He Brought Flowers*). As Thomas watched a simple fisherman at work, he pondered,

I could have told of the living water  
That springs pure.  
He would have smiled then,  
Dancing his speckled fly in the shallows,  
Not understanding.

It was futile for Thomas to prescribe to the labourer the description of Jesus as the Living Water as the labourer lacked the ability to discern and understand such spiritual metaphors. Thomas was unable to speak the language of the people, or the people could not comprehend what he was saying to them. Thomas was “often at a loss to know what he [had] to offer as a priest. Faced with the sufferings of his people, the priest despair[ed] over the impotence of his language” (Phillips 39). In “They” (*Not That He Brought Flowers*), when the peasants brought their problems to him, the concerned priest was in a dilemma: “How do I serve so / This being they have shut out / Of their houses, their thoughts, their lives?”

As a spiritual shepherd, he found that he was unable to guide his sheep, as his parishioners were numbly unable to turn to God as their Good Shepherd. In “Service” (*Pietà*), he attested,

We stand looking at  
Each other. I take the word ‘prayer’  
And present it to them. I wait idly,  
Wondering what their lips will  
Make of it. But they hand back  
Such presents. I am left alone  
With no echoes to the amen  
I dreamed of.

Thomas’s sense of alienation both from God and from the parishioners was acute. The peasants did not seem to comprehend prayer, leaving their ‘amens’ unsaid. “For some / it is all darkness; for me, too, / it is dark” (“Groping”, *Frequencies*). “Priest and labourer are differentiated as much by their respective and mutually defined failings as by their separate paths towards redemption” (Wintle 239).

The work of priest was certainly a tiring and discouraging vocation. But Thomas continued the “lonely imaginative struggle to remain true to [his] own spiritual bearings” (Brown, 1993b, 168). Pastoral work was difficult, often requiring the emptying of his self. In “Poste Restante” (*Laboratories of the Spirit*), an almost morbid picture of the priestly duty is painted:

The priest would come  
and pull on the hoarse bell nobody  
heard, and enter that place  
of darkness, sour with the mould  
of the years. ...

And so back  
to the damp vestry to the book  
where he would scratch his name and the date  
he could hardly remember, Sunday  
by Sunday.

This depressing scene was written in 1975 when Thomas was into his thirty-ninth year as priest. Even the bell is “hoarse”, as if overused, and his soul has turned “sour”. While taking the attendance of the service, he noted that it was a date which “he could hardly remember”, reflective of the monotonous turn of the calendar and the clock. This is representative of many in the clergy, “Whose collars fasten them by the neck / To loneliness” (“Country Cures”, *The Bread of Truth*). All is bleak. Often, the people forget that

even a pastor  
Is a man first and a minister after,  
Although he wears the sober armour  
Of God, and wields the fiery tongue  
Of God, and listens to the voice  
Of God, the voice no others listen to;  
The voice that is the well-kept secret  
Of man, like Santa Claus.

“The Minister”, *The Minister*

It was an uphill task to convince the peasants that God spoke through the voice that “no others listen[ed] to”.

In “The Casualty” (*Laboratories of the Spirit*), we see Thomas voicing his concern over his own sense of vocation: “I had forgotten / the old quest for truth / I was here for.” Godly service has turned into something seemingly fruitless and purposeless. He was like a “priest of a disestablished church in an out-of-way province” (N. Thomas 8). It was a “predicament of the priest who [could] find no answers to the questions for religion posed by the life he [saw] around him” (Phillips 22).

Ironically, the dullness that this poet-priest saw in his parishioners was something he experienced as well. Without doubt, the longed-for answers did not always come. In “Which” (*Laboratories of the Spirit*), he confessed,

And in the book I read:  
God is love. But lifting  
my head, I do not find it  
so.

Faith is not aligned with fact. Rosenthal remarks that Thomas's "preoccupation with God's hiddenness came less from reading theology than from serving, all his adult working life, as pastor in the stark Welsh countryside." He struggled with questions concerning his calling: "Someone must have thought of putting me here; / It wasn't myself did it" ("Who?", *Pietà*). He also realised that "Priests have a long way to go" ("The Priest", *Not That He Brought Flowers*). Here, Thomas reached a point of revelation that he had to make "peace with the status and function of his calling" (Morris 58). Kierkegaard's explanation of a man whose "authentic existence is derived only from faith born of constant and strenuous spiritual struggle with doubt in a world where nothing is certain" (Brown, 1993b, 165) certainly describes Thomas's state. Thomas's writings mirrored his priestly struggles as they became "a divine pursuit" (Wintle 309). He was, after all, characterised as "the kneeling poet" (Mole, 1990, 216). He boldly recapitulated,

And I would have  
things to say to this God  
at the judgement, storming at him,  
as Job stormed, with the eloquence  
of the abused heart.

"At It", *Frequencies*

Although with an "abused heart", Thomas's struggles were not always futile. There was indication that the light at the end of the tunnel was not too far off. In "The Chapel" (*Laboratories of the Spirit*),

...here once on an evening like this,  
in the darkness that was about  
his hearers, a preacher caught fire  
and burned steadily before them  
with a strange light, so that they saw  
the splendour of the barren mountains



about them and sang their amens  
fiercely, narrow but saved  
in a way that men are not now.

This poem suggests an occasion where the symbolic fire of God ignites the priest, a reminder to the parishioners of the fact that God, who is the Light of the world, is also with them in the "barren mountains". It is proof that life in the country "is divinely sanctioned" (Wintle 309). Shepherd comments that while Thomas finally waited in darkness, it was "a darkness which .. on occasion ... flame[d] with love" (186).

Thomas's calling was not wasted after all. But the priest "must not give way to impatience, although there will be moods and moments no doubt when he will be invaded by it" (Phillips 101). As both poet and priest, Thomas was "under the lash himself" (R.G. Thomas 87). He had to learn to present God to the peasants within their context and surroundings. Dyson says this of Thomas, that the experience of finding God could be likened to "the small field suddenly lit up by a ray of sunlight ... It is within us, as Jesus said. That is why there is no need to go anywhere from here" (1990, 202).

It is uncertain whether the peasants changed, but it is clear that Thomas himself changed. In "Affinity" (*The Stones of the Field*), he questioned and chastised himself concerning his role as priest to the peasants:

...and what have you to give  
To enrich his spirit or the way he lives?  
From the standpoint of education or caste or creed  
Is there anything to show that your essential need  
Is less than his, who has the world for church,  
And stands bare-headed in the woods' wide porch  
Morning and evening to hear God's choir  
Scatter their praises?

Here, Thomas compared himself with the peasant and recognised the endurance of the peasant's life. The very people to whom he had gone to minister in turn ministered to him, teaching him several things about life and about himself. His journey was "not so

much of teaching them as of learning from them how to approach himself" (Stevenson 42). He must be to the Welsh peasants like one of them. He must not suppose himself to be spiritually superior although it is clear that the peasants lack understanding: "The priest's relation to the peasant has so many aspects that it cannot fall under a simple description" (Phillips 38). He was not merely priest and spiritual teacher to the peasants, but also friend, confidant, guest, and often also a student or a learner of their ways. We see a maturing relationship: "the priest and his parishioners, the father and his family, the peasant and his earth, the birds' conflict with nature, the poet's wrestle with himself and words, the believer's renewed struggle with his faith; these are the concentric circles that surround the far-from-still center of R.S. Thomas's poems" (R.G. Thomas 87).

To Savill, Thomas had "a heart only too vulnerable, informed and controlled by a keen intellect in search of a truth which [would] reconcile the two" (56). Thomas did not think "his life in the Church clash[ed] with his life as a poet. His poems, indeed, are on a superficial level overwhelmingly secular, although there are a few where there is a near mystical sense of the love of God" (Nightingale 35).

Thus, because "all poetry shows us part of the poet through the medium of his work" (Savill 63), we have been privileged to study Thomas as poet and priest. The two vocations cannot be separated. The challenges of the parish became the topic of his poetry. Thomas evolved into "a voice of internal spiritual wrestling which picks its way across the dry bones of modern discourse" (Day & Docherty 233). "To a man with Thomas's two vocations ... the search for an honest answer is a long one" (Savill 57). Yet, it was within the convergence of these two vocations that Thomas came a step closer to the answer. He was thus, content:

I grow old  
bending to enter the promised  
land that was here all the time,  
happy to eat the bread that was baked  
in the poets' oven.

“The Small Country”, *Frequencies*