Finding Where the Cuckoos Sing:

R. S. Thomas and the Poiesis of Birdwatching

Joseph A. Quine

ORCID 0000-0001-9543-0588

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Abstract

This ecocritical study explores the poetry and prose of R. S. Thomas through the lens of his prolific career as a birdwatcher. This focus reveals a surprising unity in the way that Thomas uses birds in his poetry, and the way that birds and birdwatching inform his thinking and its significance in today’s cultural moment of ecological concern. In particular, while Thomas is usually studied within the context of his two competing careers as a Welsh nationalist poet writing in English, and an Anglican priest of the Church in Wales, the third – birdwatching – perhaps gets closest to the hermitic, self-proclaimed “nature mystic” and his enduring, spiritual connection to the Welsh landscape. Birdwatching is central to Thomas’s identity as a Welsh bard and priest; it is the calling that ties together his other vocations and poetic themes. Thomas’s interrelated thought and poetry is explored through what this thesis calls the “poiesis of birdwatching,” which reflects the essential eco-spiritual unity or “dwelling” for which Thomas strives. These terms are drawn from the work of Martin Heidegger, and they evoke the way that birds and birdwatching are caught up in – functioning almost as a kind of conceit for – Thomas’s encouragement of a way of seeing and being in which entities (birds, nature, the earth) reveal their unconcealed being and the unity of being. This stands against the way that for Heidegger, as for Thomas, modern technology conceals and enframes the natural world, interrupting that underlying unity and threatening the very ground of being. For Thomas, the “Machine” – and its capitalist, imperialist counterpart “England” – is a cultural, spiritual, and ultimately ecological threat. In this regard, the poiesis of birdwatching is also
fundamentally active – and hence activist. It is a politicized way in which Thomas unites issues of nation and spirituality under an ecological banner.
Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my own original work towards the PhD,

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

(iii) the thesis is fewer than 100 000 words in length, exclusive of bibliographies and appendices.

Joseph A. Quine (2019)
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Introduction

Abercuawg! Where is it?

Where is Abercuawg, that
place where the cuckoos sing?

“Abercuawg,” CP 340

Where is Abercuawg? In a sense, R. S. Thomas has always asked this question, despite first posing it in his “Abercuawg” lecture for the National Eisteddfod of Wales in 1976. There he describes this mythical Welsh Eden and “transfigured Wales” (Brown, “The Romantic Nationalism of R. S. Thomas” 161) as “a place of trees and fields and flowers and bright unpolluted streams, where the cuckoos continue to sing” (Thomas, Prose 158). This eternal place of beauty is the complete opposite of the modern world that is out of time with itself and which, in the poet’s words,

is overcrowded with people, that has endless streets of modern, characterless houses, each with its garage and television aerial, a place from where the trees and the birds and the flowers have fled before the yearly extension of concrete and tarmacadam; where the people do the same kind of soul-less, monotonous work to provide for still more and more of their kind[.] (Prose 158)

Abercuawg is an ideal that is no one place but representative of that which underlies the potential of all places. In keeping with Thomas’s concerns about the natural and cultural integrity of Wales it has a distinctly Welsh character. As Jason Walford Davies notes, Abercuawg has its “ultimate Welsh
source” (“Thick Ambush” 110) in the medieval poem “Claf Abercuawg” and Thomas then developed his vision of the “ideal, unrealizable Wales” after reading Edward Thomas’s Beautiful Wales (1905). However, “Abercuawg” also mystically transcends the nation. The search for Abercuawg is, as Brown says, the search for “intimations of the eternal” (“Romantic Nationalism” 162). It is the elusive “good place” that has “no geographical location” (161). It is a “spiritual” as well as national “ideal,” a Welsh metaphor for what Thomas calls the “eternity that awaits” or a “place” of uninterrupted unity with the natural world and ground of being, with “God/being-itself” (Brown, R. S. Thomas 116). These are also things which “Wales” often patriotically represents in Thomas’s work.

As the lecture delves into deeper philosophical territory, Thomas explains that Abercuawg is “there without being there” (Prose 156), seen or felt in its absence. This does not mean that it does not exist – for “[n]othing is nothing” and “[n]othing is without existence” (159) – but that it is nothing or nowhere because “[w]e are searching . . . within time, for something which is above time, and yet, which is ever on the verge of being” (163). Abercuawg is continually coming into being in “one smooth, unbroken movement” (162) rather than something fixed or “frozen” (164) in time. It is the ground of being, the “everlasting occasion which we can neither see nor comprehend, but which nevertheless compels our acceptance” (163). Accordingly, Abercuawg can never be “grasped by the mind alone” (162). The search for it is, as J. P. Ward suggests, the search “for some primal unity” (81) between mind and world when, as Thomas says in one poem, “There is an ingredient / / in thought that is its own / hindrance” (CP 456).
Abercuawg therefore requires a “religious” response – what Thomas calls the embodied, spiritual, imaginative, intuitive “total response of the whole person to reality” (PBRV 8–9). That “transcendent reality,” in Brown’s words (“Blessings, Stevens” 128), is what the poet-priest considers to be God or “ultimate reality” (Ormond 54). As mortal, created beings we can never comprehend God or Abercuawg, but for Thomas the value lies not in the discovery but in the search. As he explains,

through striving to see [Abercuawg], through longing for it,
through refusing to accept that it belongs to the past and has fallen into oblivion, through refusing to accept some second-hand substitute . . . [we] will succeed in preserving it as an eternal possibility. (Prose 164)

Thus, as he does with God, Thomas rejects any attempt to circumscribe Abercuawg and so control, delimit, and cheapen it. To “find” Abercuawg would be to “surround” it with “poles and wires and pylons, and . . . bury its fields under tons of concrete and tarmac” (Prose 161). When we do not find Abercuawg, however, we have “a way to come to know better, through its absence, the nature of the place we seek” (164). Moreover, by seeing what Abercuawg is not we “come closer to discovering it . . . not through forming an image of it in our language, but through feeling it with our whole being” (165).

This search for natural authenticity and being, for material and spiritual reciprocity, underlies Thomas’s poetic vision. Abercuawg represents a state of being, a practice committed to preserving an awareness of the eternal, ineffable, and unknowable against, as Brown says, the “imaginative inertia of a commercial age” (“On the Screen of Eternity” 193). That practice and pursuit is best seen through Thomas’s birdwatching.
Poet, Priest, and Birdwatcher

Ronald Stuart Thomas (1913-2000) is well-known as a Welsh poet, ardent nationalist, Anglican priest, and avid birdwatcher. The tensions between his two occupations have been well-documented. His latter avocation, however, has received little critical attention, even though birds and birdwatching connect his nationalist and “never . . . very orthodox” (Thomas, “Letter to Simon Barker” 295) religious thought under an eco-spiritual banner.

Thomas writes about the condition of Wales and about the threat of “the Machine” to its cultural and environmental authenticity. The Machine is Thomas’s synecdoche for the industrialism, mechanism, and rationalism—which has distinctly English, colonial origins—behind “the awful levelling process of modern uniformity and centralization” (Prose 35). The threat is not only to a Welsh way of life but to what “Wales” stands for, and for what Abercuawg represents in its ideal form. This is a life lived close to the earth, one in which the material and spiritual intertwine. This, at least partly, redeems the poet’s sometimes controversial nationalism; for Thomas one must fight for one’s nation in order to fight forces and mindsets which ultimately threaten more than one nation.

That Thomas’s religious poetry is tied to these themes is unsurprising, given his broad definition of religion as “embracing an experience of ultimate reality, and poetry as the imaginative presentation of such” (PBRV 9). In these poems the priest contemplates the nature of “Abercuawg,” the alienating and “meddling intellect” (Wordsworth, MW 131), and “the mind’s / degradation of
the eternal” (CP 341). Thomas seeks an awareness of the deeper material-spiritual unity of being in opposition to a mechanized and impersonal age, an analytic and clinical one . . . in which under the hard gloss of affluence there can be detected the murmuring of the starved heart and the uneasy spirit[.]

(Prose 93)

As Christopher Morgan explains,

the emotional or mystical experience of divine presence and desire [for it] . . . is precluded, for Thomas, by a burgeoning scientific revolution which is not only destructive of the natural context . . . of that experience but which, most importantly, suffocates that experience by an exclusive and uncompromising adherence to the rational, analytic mind alone. (118)

In an increasingly desacralized and mechanistic world, traditional conceptions of God as a being, rather than being-itself, only seem to confirm His absence from the material world. In turn, the “justification” for exploiting the natural world as a merely material resource furthers the division of matter and spirit, limiting intimations of the eternal unity of being. As part of nature, mankind is not impervious to these effects. The separation of the spiritual and material “botche[s] our flesh” and leaves “only the soul’s / Terrible impotence in a warm world,” as Thomas puts it in “The Minister” (CP 54).

Thus, in order to reflect upon the nature and presence of the Divine in the face of his own doubts and modern reductionist science, Thomas enlarges the idea of God. A self-avowed “nature mystic” (Thomas, “Interview with Simon Barker” 313), he ponders how God reveals Himself “through the medium of the world of nature” (A 106) not merely as nature itself but as the
ground and unity of being, an absence which is a deeper presence.¹ The priest’s unusual nature spirituality is the fruit of a mind which, unlike the eponymous minister of his aforementioned poem, refused to “wither and starve in the cramped cell / Of thought [our] fathers made [us].” For Thomas, the ecological crisis and the national crisis constitute a crisis of the spirit.

However, this thesis goes one step further to see the poet’s “vision” in the “holistic terms” which Tim McKenzie recommends (33). Thomas’s concern for preserving access to the eternal in nature finds expression through the “feathered / creatures” (UP 160) in his poetry and in the practice of birdwatching. Through birds one can see, as McKenzie says, Thomas’s poetry and thought “interweaves elements of imagination, culture, nation and spirituality.” As John Davies notes, “bird imagery has provided not incidental fluttering but a dynamic means of exploring [Thomas’s] concerns, weaving patterns which help clarify the grand design” (18). According to David Lloyd, Thomas is one of perhaps four “modern poets” for whom birds figure so “prominently” (“Making It New”123), and Thomas himself admits that “there is probably something symptomatic in words that tend to recur in a poet’s work” (Prose 76).²

Thomas began birdwatching during his early ministries in rural Wales in the 1940s. Registering how the Machine was transforming the character of the land and mechanizing its people, he admits turning to birds and birdwatching as a direct response and a form of devotion to finding the “true Wales of my imagination” (A 10). His obsession grew out of an increasing “frustration arising from the realisation that a rural way of life, which I had

² The other poets being Ted Hughes, Robinson Jeffers, and William Carlos Williams.
partly romanticised, no longer existed” (‘Birding’ 9). Thomas particularly notes that

it was through seeing the old comely things that I loved
disappearing, or being disfigured by modern technology, that I
turned increasingly to bird-watching. Away from the din . . . of
the [human] world. (A 144)

Elsewhere he elaborates that having “known the silence of the countryside
before many machines destroyed it” and “enjoyed a darkness in which one
could see the wealth of the stars” he “turned to the birds” (“Probings: An
Interview with R.S. Thomas” 41–42). The Machine was changing the human
relationship with the earth, setting a cycle of disconnection, exploitation, and
destruction in motion. The loss of the wild, mysterious, and unknown
restricted the potential for “intimations of the eternal.” Birds, however,
“belong[ed] to the open spaces,” offering a vision of what life attuned to nature
might look like.

In Thomas’s life and poetry, birdwatching was a way to search for
Abercuawg and a “lost life of imaginative vision and spiritual awareness”
(McKenzie 32). For this reason, he was eventually drawn to the remote old-
world village of Aberdaron and the vicarship of St. Hywyn’s, a church dating
back to the twelfth century. The tip of the Llŷn Peninsula was a major
“thoroughfare for migrants” (Thomas, “A Thicket in Lleyn” 96) and with its
ancient landscape, recurring stream of migrant birds, and proximity to
Bardsey Island – a holy place of pilgrimage since the middle ages and now a
bird sanctuary – Llŷn was a place resonant with intimations of the eternal.
Thomas’s important poetic contemplations of the nature of God originate
from Llŷn. Here, as he turned his binoculars to brood over the grey sea, birdwatching became a metaphor and practice for a state of being in which the absence of the “rare bird,” as Thomas describes God in “Sea-watching” (CP 306), became its rarefied presence. Indeed, one day, in a bare thicket that was suddenly “re-leafed” (Thomas, “A Thicket in Lleyn” 96) with goldcrests, he had his most significant encounter with “ultimate reality.” In a timeless moment of unity he realized how the imagination was not a barrier to the rest of nature but a means of connection with its eternal, creative processes, or what Coleridge calls the “Primary Imagination” (167). In a similar, earlier experience amidst the “wild, sweet singing” (CP 24) of birds which were transfigured into the birds of Rhiannon he realized that “everything is a fountain welling up endlessly from immortal God” (Prose 44).

Thomas’s move to Llŷn was a retreat from the modern world but neither this, his search for Abercuawg, nor his turning to birds, can be called escapist. In Llŷn he was most starkly “[f]aced with the great development in technology, [and] the lack of faith in the old traditions” (A 151). Here he “saw a new threat to beauty from technology,” read of “how the heavy machines were busy felling the forests of Brazil and south-east Asia,” and heard the “pilotless aeroplanes above practising in preparation” for a potentially nuclear war (A 108). In Llŷn, Thomas became more outspoken on the tensions between the old world of Llŷn and that of the Machine. Llŷn was “not an escape, but a peninsula where I can be inward with all the tension of our age” (A 151). Furthermore, Abercuawg is always a possibility, not a past “golden” age or place for which to yearn, idly. It is always there but never here, an ideal and a way of being to work towards continually. This “is not to put the clock back – in that tiresome phrase – not to be reactionary, but to travel a little to one
side,” as Thomas says (W. Davies, “The Site Inviolate” 21). As Thomas writes in “The Signpost” (and as Walford Davies notes): “Time / is a main road, eternity / the turning that we don’t take.” In other words, Abercuawg is not a transcendentalist vision or “a mere cipher for some vague spirituality” (to quote Davies). Instead it is, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s words, Earth “crammed with heaven” (265). Abercuawg evokes a “potent,” “potential” Wales and, to push its connotations a little further than Davies, a powerfully patriotic vision of the nation as a place and state of unity. As a practice and commitment to finding Abercuawg in the world of the Machine, birdwatching is fundamental to Thomas’s ecological vision.

**Ecocriticism**

Ecocriticism considers how the environmental crisis is a crisis of ideas about nature and the human relationship with the natural world. As the editor of *The Ecocriticism Reader* explains, ecocriticism explores how “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Glotfelty xix). On that note, it also examines the “relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history,” including “the term ‘human’ itself” (Garrard 5).

This thesis employs an ecocritical methodology because Thomas’s concern for preserving access to the spiritual foundations of the natural world, against the rationalist and instrumentalist world of the Machine, has definite ecological implications. A particular focus is on Thomas’s contribution to ecocritical discourse, especially the model that his art provides in discussions of the “place of creative imagining and writing in the complex set of
relationships between humankind and environment, between mind and world, between thinking, being and dwelling” (Bate, *The Song of the Earth* 72–73). As per Michael Cohen’s ecocritical imperatives, this study not only “celebrate[s]” Thomas’s ecophilosophical contributions but aims to “facilitate clearer thinking about human transactions with environments, and . . . better nature writing in the future” (Cohen 30).

At the heart of Thomas’s poetry is the idea that an awareness of the sacred unity of being is vital if humankind is to dwell better upon the earth. This is important in the face of scientific reductionism which presents the earth and its entities as silent, soulless matter and resources. As Christopher Manes notes, such science often focuses on acquiring only the “type of knowledge” that allows it to manipulate the physical world for financial gain (“A Natural History of Silence” 193–94). The compression of the entire “biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of epistemology,” Manes explains elsewhere, enables its exploitation and reinforces claims of “human difference, rationality, and transcendence” (“Nature and Silence” 15, 17).

Thomas, of course, condemns the “insatiable greed” of the Machine – the mindset and manifestation of scientific advances which are “used under financial pressure to exploit and exhaust the earth’s resources” (A 108). The danger this poses is clear:

The greed of the developers is threatening to change the climate substantially by the end of the century. The emphasis placed by capitalism and industry on continuous progress is creating more demand for raw materials than can be met. And on top of all this, the mind of man has discovered a power that is endangering his own future; and . . . the superpowers have been
caught in an arms race that is certain to lead to a war that will destroy all the work of the centuries in addition to mankind itself. (A 108)

Thus, Thomas focuses on conceiving the deeper, sacred unity of being. This is not the material processes of Life, not “nature,” but the “Being of the universe” in which all things are united, as the poet explains in his lecture “Unity” (29). This is the everything that is no thing or, to employ Wallace Stevens’s words, the “Nothing that is not here and the nothing that is” (10) – something which cannot be objectified by the rational mind. This unity is a conception of God insofar as God is that Being which sustains all life, not a being. This unity, moreover, is “what exists at the centre of things, the unity in which everyone can see the reason for, and the meaning of, the life of the whole of creation and of their own little personal lives” (“Unity” 30). It is the creed of the future . . . when science and technology will have freed themselves of the materialism that overcame them in the wake of Darwinism and the reductionism that followed it, and when Western thought will have been reconciled with Eastern thought to create a new synthesis. (30)

Thomas’s conception of unity provides a deeper, mystical sense of what Timothy Morton – avoiding the metaphysical abstraction of “nature” for its always implying something separate from the human – describes as the “circumambient, or surrounding, world,” the recognition of which dissolves “the difference between subject and object” (Ecology Without Nature 33, 64). This is important given what Thomas calls the “problem of the widening of the gap between man and the earth in the present era” (The Poet’s Voice 1). As Garrard states, the “origin of environmental crisis” lies in “the dualistic
separation of humans from nature promoted by western philosophy and
culture” (24). If, however, we could “experience the fact that we [are]
embedded in our world,” as Morton suggests, “we would be less likely to
destroy it.”

Thomas’s conception of God is crucial in this regard as it provides a
way to understand the human connection to the eternal creative processes of
the universe in the face of Western rationalism and human exceptionalism.
Indeed, at the heart of Thomas’s ecological response is his conception of God,
who he sees as the encompassing ground of being. Thomas explains,

I reject . . . the belief in a God who once made the world, and
then left it to run by itself, like a self-correcting machine. . . . Of

course, this accords with certain mechanistic theories of a
certain kind of scientist. But it does no justice to the experience

of many artists and religious that the earth is alive, and even to
the views of people like J. E. Lovelock, with his concept of Gaia.

(“Probings” 46).

Traditional anthropocentric conceptions of God fail to account for His
presence in the violent mechanistic world of natural process. Instead,

Thomas’s recurring image of the raptor, as we will see, synthesizes his
“redefinition” of the “wild,” undelimited God of this world. To assume
anthropocentrically God’s otherness to this world, and evade natural reality
rather than confront it on its own terms, only serves to further alienate one
from that reality and the truth of one’s involvement with it. Thomas therefore
opens up the idea of God, emphasises God’s unknowability, and responds to
the “post-Romantic” notion of the natural world as a “mixed experience of
exaltation and horror” (Picot 109). This allows Thomas to resacralize the earth
and envision the connection between the spiritual and material, human and nature. The sense of a greater eco-spiritual unity means that the world is not something merely material and exploitable which humankind transcends but a sacred inviolable unity, the destruction of which is our own.

In order to frame Thomas’s conception of God and its eco-spiritual implications this thesis turns to Bron Taylor’s formulation of “Dark Green Religion.” Thomas’s nature spirituality reflects what Taylor identifies as a “cognitive shift” (x) in society towards a “spiritually meaningful understanding of the cosmos, and the human place in it.” These “green religions” stand apart from traditional anthropocentric, and increasingly “less plausible,” religions. Instead they offer views of the earth as “sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care” – views which have become “increasingly important in global environmental politics” (ix). Thomas’s “Gaian” understanding of God as the underlying and encompassing ground of being, for instance, preserves a sense of the numinous and sacred without separating it from the world of material process. This sense of unity provides an intriguing way for the modern, scientific world to close the troublesome gap between it and religion, and so between the material and spiritual – especially since “the most recent discoveries and theories in the world of physics” show that “matter is not half as solid” as we tend to think but rather “so immaterial that it is more akin to spirit than conventional matter” (“Unity” 33). Thomas’s ideas about God therefore also reflect what Kate Rigby calls the “regrounding” of religion – that is, the “rehallowing of the phenomenal world” which occurs in connection with “the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking” (“Romanticism and Ecocriticism” 71–72). Thus, Thomas shows how religion can be ecologically responsive from within the world of science.
Indeed, in its discussion of Thomas’s panentheism the present study will also be of interest to scholars at the intersection of eco-religious and ecocritical studies, including those in the fields of eco-theology and ecological biblical studies who are now revealing a long tradition of earth-centred Christianity.

Thomas’s focus on unity is also intertwined with the matter of Wales. His nationalist poetry centres upon the ecological drama of the relationship between humanity and nature and the role of the colonial Machine, exploring how colonialism works by eradicating the connection between human and nature in order to open up human, nation, and nature to exploitation. In other words, the threat to Wales from the colonial Machine relates to how it alienates human and nature, Welshman and nation. Thus, restoring that sacred unity is crucial for both nature and nation, and this study therefore elucidates, to use Garrard’s phrase, Thomas’s “green’ moral and political agenda” (3). Moreover, the incursions of the Machine on the farm and the Anglicizing of Welsh culture reflect how, as Jonathan Bate observes, “ecological exploitation is always coordinate with social exploitation” (48) and, as Garrard states, environmental problems arise from “systems of domination or exploitation of humans by other humans” (31). Therefore, while the idea of nations, as Morton notes, poses a “barrier to a genuine (sense of) interrelationship between beings” and places because it entails difference, separation, and insularism (“John Clare’s Dark Ecology” 179), Thomas appeals to it for its cultural and ecological value. “Wales” is more than a nation, it represents a state of being in the world, an alternative to the Machine and the nation with whom he associates it: “England.”

Ultimately, through the lens of birdwatching this study examines how Thomas addresses these ecocritical issues. Birds and birdwatching are key
ways in which he unfolds his vision and understanding of the unity of being. Birdwatching, we will see, represents a way of seeing the world not as mute matter but as alive with voices and presences which call the birdwatcher into a state of unity or what Rigby calls the “polyphonic song of our nonhuman earth others” ("Earth, World, Text" 434). Indeed, birdwatching becomes a metaphor for this different awareness and state of being. It is implicated in resacralizing the earth, perceiving the deeper material-spiritual unity, and healing the philosophical separation of human and nature.

Heidegger and Modern Technology

In order to understand how birdwatching “works” we must further understand the problems to which it responds. Martin Heidegger’s lecture “The Question Concerning Technology” – a foundational ecocritical text – sheds light on Thomas’s concerns about the Machine and his ornithological response, providing an interpretative framework but not a conjectured basis for Thomas’s thought. Thomas’s objective, framed in Heideggerian terms, is to “dwell” in “the Open.” The Open, a term drawn from Heidegger’s essay “What Are Poets For” (106), is “akin to [Friedrich] Schiller’s ‘naïve’, where there is no division between nature and consciousness,” according to Bate (263). As Rigby also says, it “means something like all that is undelimited” ("Earth, World, Text" 431). In Thomasian terms, it is the ground and unity of being. Meanwhile, to “dwell” is to “preserve and care” for what Heidegger calls “the fourfold” – the unity of the earth, sky, divine and mortal – in “its essential being” and self “presencing” ("Building Dwelling Thinking" 147-150). The “fundamental character” of dwelling is leaving “something beforehand in its
own nature,” returning it “specifically to its being,” and preserving the “free
sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature.” This, we will see, is the
ecological outcome of birdwatching and it is arrived at through “poiesis,” the
“bringing-forth” (“The Question Concerning Technology” 317) of the truth of
things in their self-presencing authentic being.

For Heidegger, modern technology obstructs and interrupts human
dwelling by concealing the being of things (read: nature and natural entities)
and subsequently the truth of the human relationship with them. For
Heidegger, the way of “revealing that holds sway throughout modern
technology” does not “unfold into a bringing-forth in the sense of poiesis” but
“is a challenging which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply
energy which can be extracted and stored as such” (320). The process whereby
things become so “enframed” – Heidegger’s term for this revealing which
“conceals” and “challenges” the self-revealing of things, thrusting man “into a
relation to whatever is that is at once antithetical and rigorously ordered”
(332) – is illustrated through a hydroelectric plant on the Rhine. As Heidegger
explains, “[i]n the context of the interlocking processes pertaining to the
orderly disposition of electrical energy, even the Rhine itself appears to be
something at our command. . . . the river is dammed up into the power plant”
(321). Accordingly, “[w]hat the river is now, namely, a water-power supplier,
derives from the essence of the power station” not, as Bate says, from the
river’s own “riverness” (254). As Bate explains, the way modern technology
enframes makes “everything part of a system, thus obliterating the
unconcealed being-there of particular things” (255). This enframing, and the
awareness it encourages as “a means to an end” (Heidegger 313), means that
things, including humans, become seen in purely instrumental terms as “resource[s] for human consumption” (Bate 254).

Notably, Thomas identifies similar concerns from an eco-national viewpoint. The incursion of the Machine was making the Welsh countryside “an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry,” to employ Heidegger’s remarks about the Rhine (“The Question Concerning Technology” 321). The arrival of English holiday home buyers, alongside the romanticisation of the landscape, was driving out traditional Welsh custodians who understood the land on its own terms. Their disappearance was a critical loss to Welsh identity and autonomy, and the loss of a more-than-Welsh way of life. Meanwhile, the tractor was also changing the relationship between (Welsh)man and nature. Heidegger’s thoughts from around the same time evoke Thomas’s concerns. “The field that the peasant formerly cultivated and set in order [now] appears differently than it did when to set in order,” Heidegger explains, “still meant to take care of and maintain,” to place “seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watch over its increase” (320). Now, however, “the cultivation of the field has come under the grip of another kind of setting-in-order, which sets upon nature,” namely agriculture and “the mechanized food industry.”

Like Thomas, Heidegger links the danger of modern technology and enframing to “[m]odern science’s way of representing” and how this “pursues and entraps nature” (326). He explains that such science sets “nature up to exhibit itself as a coherence of forces calculable in advance,” thereby ordering “its experiments precisely for the purpose of asking whether and how nature reports itself when set up in this way.” “[P]rostitut[ed] to the money power,” to use Thomas’s words (“Probings” 44), this is not a way of open-mindedly
approaching “ultimate reality” – an approach which Thomas suggests is the essentially religious focus of “pure science.” Instead, such scientific investigations limit and contract that reality, focussed as they are upon knowledge that will maximize their “yields and profits” only (Manes, “A Natural History of Silence” 194). As Heidegger says, when man investigating, observing, pursues nature as an area of his own conceiving, he has already been claimed by a way of revealing that challenges him to approach nature as an object of research, until even the object disappears into the objectless of standing-reserve [that is, a resource for human consumption] (“The Question Concerning Technology” 324).

This reinforces the greed-driven “reductionist tendencies” which Thomas condemns in “applied science as manifest in technology” (“Probings” 43). “The scientist / brings his lenses to bear,” as Thomas writes in “First Person,” “and unity / is fragmented” (CLP 142). With “life . . . nothing but a complex collection of atoms,” God and beauty went “to oblivion, leaving behind them a world that was nothing but a mathematical variation on atoms” (A 145).

The poet elaborates on the problem in his “Unity” lecture:

by looking at the order of nature as something which existed primarily for the sake of man, and thus as something to be exploited by him, man has created a situation in which the Earth’s resources are rapidly being depleted, in which the environment is being defiled, and in which man himself has the power to destroy all living things on Earth, including himself. (33)
These ways of looking at the world set up man as controlling subject and nature as controllable object. Thus, as Thomas writes, “the microscope / Is our sin” (CP 228); it presents the world as so much manipulable matter over which “we tower enormous.” Moreover, in concealing the autonomy of the natural world and one’s connectedness to it, blind recklessness becomes possible. As Heidegger also suggests, the Machine dehumanizes man by concealing his connectedness to nature (suggesting that our connectedness to nature defines, rather than conflicts with, our human being). As he explains, when the unconcealed no longer concerns man even as an object, but exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve. (“The Question Concerning Technology” 332)

As the “orderer,” the “lord of the earth,” man fails to recognize that the world is not of his construction. He also fails to see how he too is ordered by the Machine. In other words, man fails to encounter his true “essence” in the world, his unity with the earth.

The danger of modern technology therefore pertains to its concealing of “truth.” Modern technology blocks “the call of nature’s self-disclosure, its autopoiesis” (Rigby, “Earth, World, Text” 438) and the “call of the other,” the spiritual, irreducible, ineffable, and Divine. Enframing “conceals that revealing which, in the sense of poiesis, lets what presences come forth into appearance” (Heidegger 332) and “conceals revealing itself,” blocking “the shining-forth and holding sway of truth” (333). In other words, modern
technology blocks the way to the “Open” and a deeper sense of one’s being-in-the-world. Ultimately, the “rule of enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth.”

In light of this, Heidegger turns to poiesis – just as Thomas, with similar implications, turns to birds. Poiesis is a “bringing-forth” of the truth of things which does not conceal and through which “physis” – the “arising of something from out of itself” in nature (Heidegger 317), the “self-disclosure of natural entities” and of the “primordial” earth and sky (Rigby, “Earth, World, Text” 428, 433) – is revealed. For Heidegger, in their “supreme,” “mysterious” ancient forms (and practices) art, poetry, and “everything poetical that [has] obtained poiesis as its proper name” are therefore not simply aesthetic but “pious . . . i.e., yielding to the holding sway and the safekeeping of truth” (“The Question Concerning Technology” 340). This provides a profound perspective on the nature and ability of humanly-created things like poetry. “Poetry . . . admits man’s dwelling into its very nature” because, in Jonathan Bate’s words, “it is a presencing not a representation, a form of being” in which one is attuned to the self-presencing of the world (261–62). Accordingly, if humans dwell when “they save the earth,” then it follows, as Bate explains, that “poetry is the place where we save the earth” (283).

However, poiesis is not limited to the work of art. This idea is especially foundational to this thesis as it allows for the poiesis of birdwatching. As Heidegger notes,

It is of utmost importance that we think bringing-forth in its full scope and at the same time in the sense in which the Greeks thought it. Not only handicraft manufacture, not only
artistic and poetical bringing into appearance and concrete imagery, is a bringing-forth, *poiesis*. (“The Question Concerning Technology” 317)

Rigby explains further,

Heidegger . . . point[s] to the possibility of a ‘saving power,’ . . . [in] poiesis, the bringing forth, which does not challenge by enframing, but which lets things be in their obscure otherness in the very process of revealing them within the work of art. . . . yet, although it is true that in the concluding paragraphs of [*The Question Concerning Technology*] . . . Heidegger’s talk is all of the work of art, poiesis is for him ultimately not confined to artistic practice. As suggested in the Hölderlin poem that Heidegger cites here, . . . poiesis extends ultimately to a whole way of life. As such it is itself a form of praxis: that of knowing how to dwell. (“Earth, World, Text” 430)

“In this respect,” Rigby continues, it “would appear” that rather than confining “itself to the work of art as the sole remaining locus of resistance” Heideggerian poiesis is “actually more political, or at least activist” than typically construed.

This wide definition of poiesis encompasses Thomas’s birdwatching in and out of his poetry. Birdwatching is a poietic practice in a number of ways, aligning with Plato’s definition of poiesis, as supplied by Heidegger: “Every occasion for whatever passes beyond the nonpresent and goes forward into presencing is *poiesis*, bringing-forth” (317). Such poiesis, for instance, is in effect when the absence of the “rare bird,” in “Sea-watching,” becomes “as its presence.”
Poiesis

For Heidegger, poiesis offers a crucial corrective to the enframing of the world. His ultimate objective is human dwelling through a conception of the unity of being. In his own way this is also Thomas’s focus as, for him, God is that unity, the ground of being. Indeed, speaking of his perception of nature in one interview he says that he has found “it’s not necessary to call it nature, it is God really” (“R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge” 47). Thus, by applying the work of Heidegger, Rigby, and Bate, this thesis examines the ecological underpinnings of Thomas’s poetry and the poiesis of birdwatching, through which he brings forth the undelimited “ecocosmic dimension of our being,” to borrow Rigby’s phrase (431). Yet the question remains: what is poiesis and how does it work? How does Thomas, to use Bate’s terms, “recover the original revealing” (257) and natural unfolding of things? How does he “experience the call of the primordial truth of things” – or, in other words, God? How does he model what it means to dwell?

In the final chapter of The Song of the Earth Bate elaborates on Heidegger’s belief in the saving power of the poetic and the potential of an “ecopoetics.” As the name suggests, this is a (re)making of the earthly home in which we live (“eco” being derived from oikos, the Ancient Greek word for home). This “making” occurs in and through language (logos), the constructed “world” of human consciousness which transcends “the here-and-now of our bodies” (249-50). Poetry is therefore crucial in helping reunite human and earth, mind and nature.
The ability of poetry to “speak ‘earth’” (251) not just “world” lies in its ancient, sacred roots as a making which predates that enforced by modern technology. Poetry calls into being the absent or other, the “essential” being of things that lies beyond the “frame of the technological” (258). The poetic “articulates both presence and absence,” Bate writes (281), explaining how it does not conceal the being of things. “[I]t is both the imaginary recreation and the trace on the sand” of authentic moments of insight into and unity with the earth which, to quote Wordsworth, “lie too deep for tears” (MW 302).

However, Bate does not provide a critical framework for ecopoetics or – as Rigby points out regarding Heidegger as well – account for the problem that all language and all things of human making inevitably “enframe” or conceal. As Rigby explains elsewhere, writing and language “direct consciousness away from the materiality of the more-than-human world around us towards the ideational world that the spoken word . . . open[s] up within our minds” (“Writing After Nature” 360). How, then, can one speak for the more-than-human world in a way that “preserves” and admits dwelling, and leads back to the Open?

Following Bate’s important discussion, Rigby theorizes what “ecopoiesis” might look like. Like Bate she agrees that “the poet’s task is to reverse the disastrous departure from the Open” (“Earth, World, Text” 431) which divides human from nature. However, the potential of poiesis resides in its being not only an artistic making which “admit[s] us into dwelling” by “drawing [things] forth into unconcealment,” but in its being an art – a “whole way of life,” a “form of praxis: that of knowing how to dwell” (430) – since dwelling is itself poietic, something humans do through art. In other words, because dwelling occurs through poiesis, the essence of poiesis is dwelling.
Indeed, Bate notes how Heidegger (like Thomas) turns from the human “mode of being” that is tied up with modern technology to how humans also “dwell poietically” through language (258). This reinforces the political significance of poiesis: “if poetry is the original admission of dwelling,” as Bate says, “then poetry is the place where we save the earth” (283).

The practice of poiesis in and outside of poetry is characterized by openness to the self-disclosing (or indeed self-concealing) of the earth and its entities. As quoted earlier, poiesis is a “bringing forth” which does not conceal but “let things be in their obscure otherness in the very process of revealing them” (Rigby 430). In order to reverse the departure from the Open one must therefore resist objectifying ways of human knowing and naming which lead to that departure. Instead, one must “turn aside” to the undelimited unity and “eternity that awaits,” to quote Thomas’s apposite advice (CP 302). As Katie Gramich says, this is “the attitude of the artist and the philosopher. . . . a retreat from the world of humans and the machine, a turning aside to embrace an idealistic quest for spiritual truth and beauty” (139). This does not mean renouncing all knowing but fostering a different awareness, turning a little aside from the main road down which civilization tends to rush in pursuit of knowledge, advancement, conquest, and gain. Openness to a “more original revealing” and “more primal truth” means being aware of the ways in which the natural world and human involvement with it may be concealed.

Such openness involves cultivating what this thesis calls “poethics,” poietic principles such as silence, stillness, patience, praise, imagination, and wonder which attune us to what Heidegger calls the “highest” form of poiesis:
physis ("The Question Concerning Technology" 317). At the heart of this is the displacement of the self and what Thomas calls the “analytic eye” (CP 56) for a humble celebration (rather than challenging) of that which is given and, as Heidegger says in one essay, “bestows world” ("The Pathway" 70). The hope is that with the wonder of a child one might “find the centre,” the “heaven” that is here where “life is still asleep” under “the smooth shell / Of eggs in the cupped nest,” unbroken by the thinking mind’s “subterfuge” (CP 56). The goal is openness to “the natural unfolding of things” (Bate 256) and “reawakening the momentary wonder of unconcealment” (258).

In Thomas’s case, this is not an evasive, mystical approach to problems which demand engagement with how the mind does frame the world. The point, rather, is a different way of looking which challenges enframing. It seems unavoidable, then, that part of this involves transcending the self and its world. As Gramich suggests, “a glimpse of the Other can be gained only when the reflection of the self is not obscuring the view” (138). Yet such transcendence is toward a deeper connection with the earth, not away from it. The displacement of the eye/I means accommodating a richer sense of the I in which, to suggest a link with Emerson, “all mean egotism vanishes” and one becomes “a transparent eyeball,” seeing “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through one” as “part or particle of God” (10). If this still sounds too transcendentalist one might recall Thomas’s note that “matter is not half as

3 Nb. While finalizing this thesis it came to my attention that there are other critical studies that have used the term “poethics.” Most notably, the term may have been coined by Denise Ferreira Da Silva in “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics,” The Black Scholar 44.2 (2014): 81-97. More recently, the term “geopoethics” has been used by Peter Minter, with similar emphasis on ethics and poetics, in his special issue of Plumwood Mountain: An Australian Journal of Ecopoetry and Ecopoetics (3.2). However, my usage and definition of “poethics,” in light of Heideggerian poiesis, differs from these other usages and has been developed independently.
solid” as we tend to think but “more akin to spirit” (“Unity” 33). Accordingly, we “need qualities such as imagination and intuition and a mystical attitude,” as Thomas states, if we are to re-discover the dimensions in which we live – qualities which poiesis affords. Heidegger seems to share this sentiment on the humble practice of poiesis:

Wherever man opens his eyes and ears, unlocks his heart, and gives himself over to meditating and striving, shaping and working, entreating and thanking, he finds himself everywhere already brought into the unconcealed. (“The Question Concerning Technology” 324)

Thus, far from being impractical, poiesis is a key response to the unfolding of the world.

However, poiesis and dwelling inevitably occur through language and, as a human making, how can the “I” not intrude and conceal authentic being? This question is crucial if we are to retain faith in the capabilities of language and literature in an age of environmental crisis, rather than succumb to a poststructuralist faithlessness which, resigned to the unhealable rift between words and things, is only concerned with texts.

For Rigby, poiesis which leads back to the earth embraces negativity and unknowability. This is an intriguing point of connection with Thomas, given his interest in the via negativa and the apophatic tradition of Christian mysticism. For him, not delimiting ultimate reality destabilizes the rational world of boundaries and divisions, leading to a reorienting sense of undelimited presence and unity. Rigby similarly suggests that “some form of exile or at least defamiliarization is intrinsic to dwelling” (“Earth, World, Text” 432), reinforcing how poiesis involves a different way of looking and a
“conscious commitment” to dwelling as something which the human condition interrupts. In order to avoid concealing things even as it brings them out of concealment, poiesis must embrace absence and otherness. Rigby explains,

We must first encounter the absence or obscurity of a place before we can begin to attune ourselves to it in dwelling. The poet admits us into dwelling precisely to the extent that she allows even the most familiar things to appear in all their strangeness, as if encountered for the first time. Only thus might things cease to be mere equipment; only thus might they be revealed as a gathering of the fourfold, the matrix of our dwelling.

The resulting revelation of this presence and unity is the subject of “Sea-watching.”

Rigby consolidates how poiesis might work through Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” and his theory of how art brings forth the earth in relief. For Heidegger, art foregrounds the “agonistic” “interrelationship” between the “world” it sets up and the “earth” which founds and grounds it and is known, in the text, by its absence (Rigby 436). Ecopoiesis, then, might accordingly draw attention to the earth by foregrounding its absence and “unsayability” in (and beyond) the text – that is, by admitting the tension between that which is presented in the text and that which “withdraws and remains hidden.” Rigby suggests that art can do this – and so reveal the earth without concealing it – in numerous ways. A text “preserves the undisclosed” and “point[s] us to that which lies beyond its own enframing” when it admits “that which necessarily escapes disclosure,”
presents the earth or ground of being as “unsayable,” includes “moments of incoherence,” encompasses “moment[s] of negativity,” attends to “the withholding of what is promised,” or is “self-cancelling” by acknowledging its “failure to . . . mediate the voice of nature” (437). Such poiesis “draws attention” to the text as “a mode of enframing,” thereby enabling the unsayable truth – the unconcealed being of things and the ground of being – to shine through in its absence, in the text’s gaps and silences. This preserves the sacred and mysterious “undisclosed – that is, unspeakable – dimension of primordial nature as earth.” As Timothy Morton similarly suggests, “acknowledging the gap” between the signified and the signifier “is a paradoxical way of having greater fidelity to things” (Ecology Without Nature 142). “[I]t is only in the noncorrespondence of [the] response” to what precedes it, Rigby elaborates, “that we remain open to that which addresses us in an other, who or which is as such irreducible to the self” (“Earth, World, Text” 438).

Such writing therefore draws attention to writing’s “secondariness,” evoking the earth’s primariness as the ground of being. The earth pre-exists and environs our texts rather than being determined by them – as is often too quickly assumed in the wake of poststructuralism (Rigby, “Writing After Nature” 362). This directs the reader away from the word to the more-than-human world which surrounds it and first “writes” us into being. Such poiesis leads back to that which is imaginatively reconstructed as a “trace on the sand.” The gap between word and thing, human and nature, therefore becomes something not to lament but to appreciate. It is evidence that we stand on the inside of a greater reality which subsumes our subjectivity. Such
poiesis therefore allows us to examine the nature of our connection with and dislocation from the earth self-reflexively.

What poiesis reveals, then, is that it is the product of imaginative truth – an understanding which may absolve poetry, especially, of enframing. Poetry conveys the many-hued nature of truth and individual experience. Here things like metaphor provide “a way of understanding hidden connections” and “reunifying” the rational world which science has “fragmented” (Bate 247). Metaphor evokes the “simultaneous similarity and [essential] difference . . . between the metaphorical word and the subject to which it applies,” notes Scott Knickerbocker (24), another scholar interested in ecopoetics. Figurative language preserves the autonomy of that which it presents, affirming poetry as a viable making and “respecting of the earth,” to borrow Bate’s words (282). Metaphor admits that imagination and reality are both “distinct . . . and inseparable,” as Knickerbocker suggests (24), but in even more fundamental ways than Knickerbocker describes. This refers not only to the complex “interdependence” of culture and nature but to the ways in which the imaginative mind is distinct from the material world of creative process and yet echoes those processes within itself.

This may be the particular saving grace of the work of imaginative truth. Poiesis acknowledges not only that it cannot present more than a human account of truth, but that it is a repetition of the eternal creative act of the universe and thus itself a presentation of what Thomas calls “imaginative truth” (Ormond 53). It is a revelation of the higher, infinite truth and creativity from which it arises. By “echoing the primary imagination,” Thomas says, the poet “recreates” the primal creative energy and unity of the earth, forcing “those who read him to do the same, thus bringing them nearer the
primary imagination themselves, and so, in a way, nearer to the actual being of God as displayed in action” (PBRV 8). In its connection to the primal creative energy and unity of the earth, poetry reveals that which grants and grounds. This is also the key way in which Thomas posits the connection of human and nature, mind and matter. Imagination connects the poet and reader to the primordial creativity of the universe, that which grants and grounds the presentation of imaginative truth and reveals itself through its “secondary” repetition in the human mind. The imagination, then, is a “unifying power” and the “two things” which “best” supply the “unifying power of the imagination” are “poetry and religion. Science destroys as it gives” (Thomas, PBRV 8–9).

Thus, the “sacred role” of the poet – and poetry – is not only “disclosing the being of entities in language” and “let[ting] them be” in their otherness, as Bate says (258), but truly the presentation – as Thomas argues – of imaginative truth, of the undelimited creative unity of being, whether that be “God” or “Nature” or “the Open.” The poet constructs a world and speaks into being a truth that can only be communicated and comprehended imaginatively. The poem, then, is a response to that which lies beyond it and is sacrosanct. As Timothy Clark also suggests, the sacred role of poiesis lies in the way that it fosters an awareness of the world as “a continual happening, within which alone human consciousness finds itself . . . encompassed by a realm which its own projections or conceptualising . . . [cannot] ground, which thus appear[s] sacral” (57). Poiesis, then, is indeed religion and religion poiesis, to slightly paraphrase Thomas (Ormond 53). This reinforces the “religious” or “pious” implications of poiesis which we will see in the poiesis of birdwatching.
Ultimately, the essence of poiesis is a particular orientation to the dwelling place; a practice and commitment to dwelling. The consciousness behind this is, for Heidegger, not “the conscious positing of various representations of an object world” but a non-assertive tracing out of the measure and manner of the realm of unconcealment in which it already moves. . . . it is not a matter of ‘grasping’, ‘securing’, ‘making certain’, and ‘mastering’ but of ‘following’, ‘hearkening’, ‘hinting’ and ‘being guided’.

(Clark 56)

Poiesis does not prescribe or describe, voice or present, but respond to the self-presencing of the earth and its entities, that which first addresses, calls, precedes, and exceeds us and our makings. Poiesis – as Bate says of poetry – “is a presencing not a representation, a form of being not of mapping” (262). In this it leads back to the earth and ground of being – that which is irreducible to what humankind sometimes makes of it (pun intended), that which withstands “man’s smudge and . . . smell,” in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s words (70). The goal of poiesis is to foster a sense of “participation in the more-than-human world” (Rigby, “Earth, World, Text” 435), moments of “participatory consciousness” such as Thomas describes in his thicket in Llŷn.

As Bate suggests, “[w]hat matters is not the conclusion . . . we draw about [something] . . . but the fact that we are made to attend to it” (273). This does not entail dissatisfaction with our texts but recognition that the poietic is “invaluable in calling us to attend anew to the complex interweaving of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals” (Rigby 440) which escapes human disclosure. As Rigby explains, “[o]nly by insisting on the limits of the text” (or human knowing) and its
inevitable falling-short as a mode of response . . . [or] mediation, can we affirm that there is, in the end, no substitute for our own embodied involvement with the more-than-human natural world.

This is the truest sense in which poiesis can make the dwelling-place. The eco-poet’s task, then, is “not so much to draw things into Being through their song, but rather to draw us forth into the polyphonic song” of the earth (434), the “wider ecocosmic dimension of our being” (432).

**The Poiesis of Birdwatching**

As the title of this thesis suggests, Thomas’s poetry and his devotion to birdwatching closely align with the qualities, practices, and endeavours of poiesis. For him, birdwatching is a way of life, an ecocentric approach modelled in his poetry, and a conceit for an eco-spiritual way of looking at ultimate reality. The tasks of poet and birdwatcher – as those familiar with the Romantic poets, especially John Clare, will affirm – are complementary, providing Thomas’s poetry with an important connection to the external world. This is especially significant given Rigby’s even broader declaration that “rediscovering the art of dwelling . . . is not something that can be achieved by the poet qua poet: it must rather be worked towards by all of us, every day, as we endeavor to find new ways of creating and relating” (“Earth, World, Text” 440).

This is the truest kind of poiesis and it seems, in some capacity, to be understood in the many ways that people urgently try to “relate” to the natural world today. Thus, not only is Thomas’s birdwatching poietic, it is
symptomatic of a particular cultural moment which – at this critical point in what geologists and environmentalists call the Anthropocene – emphasizes the importance of reorienting ourselves within the world around us. The contemporary surge of interest in birdwatching, together with the appetite for nature writing and a rise in nature spirituality, reflects a response to the growing environmental losses caused by technological man’s obliviousness to the more-than-human world and unity of being. Thomas’s birdwatching and his forays into nature writing, such as *A Year in Llyn*, are therefore strikingly pertinent to current cultural debate about the human relationship with the natural world. Moreover, his work finds its place not only amongst British – or rather, Welsh – literature or late Romantic and religious poetry, but within the eco-spiritual and eco-philosophical traditions of writers like Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edward Thomas, Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, and Ted Hughes.

Ultimately, for Thomas, birdwatching can be seen as a poietic practice and a poetic motif which reflects poiesis. It involves bringing forth, and learning to dwell in, the unconcealed and undelimited unity of being. As Bate notes, “[t]o dwell you must be content to listen, to hear the music” (236) – like a birdwatcher, perhaps – in order to be open to the world’s self-presencing rather than “re-present” or challenge it from the position of “a Cartesian subject” (230-1). Accordingly, birdwatching reflects an openness which leads back to the un-enframed world of vibrant presence rather than silent, exploitable emptiness. Birdwatching provides that alternative consciousness which Heidegger seeks in poiesis, a consciousness against the modern world’s concealment of the unity of being and consequently one’s being *in* the world. Thus, birdwatching is not only a way of life, for Thomas, but a point of
connection with the *source* of life, with being. Birdwatching evokes how, in Ned Thomas’s words, “[i]t is a search for meaning and purpose, a concern with *Being* that runs through” Thomas’s poems, set against technology’s ability to limit the human capacity to receive intimations of the eternal (56).

This is clear in Thomas’s poem “A Thicket in Lleyn” (*CP* 511).4 Here the birdwatcher’s unintrusive wakefulness to a flock of birds – and the way he brings forth their vibrant being and connectedness to the earth in his imagery, without naming and distinguishing them – culminates in a moment in which he becomes *part* of his environment, not surrounded by it:

> I was no tree walking.
> I was still. They ignored me,
> the birds, the migrants
> on their way south. They re-leafed
> the trees, budding them
> with their notes. They filtered through
> the boughs like sunlight,
> looked at me from three feet
> off, their eyes blackberry bright,
> not seeing me, not detaching me
> from the withies, where I was
caged and they free.

> ........................................
> they netted me in their shadows,
> brushed me with sound, feathering the arrows

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4 Nb. “Lleyn” is the anglicized spelling of “Llŷn” that is used in this essay and in the poem “A Thicket in Lleyn” (*CP* 511).
of their own bows, and were gone[.] (CP 511)

Notably, the “I” becomes “still” as the birdwatcher experiences what he later understands as “A repetition in time of the eternal / I AM,” that is, the eternal creative process of which he is an inseparable part. He sees in the birds’ endless migrations the deeper unity which underlies life and death, the fundamental creative and destructive processes of the universe – the pull of which every living thing obeys.

To begin this survey of the poiesis of birdwatching, Chapter One explores birdwatching as a form of praxis which responds to the alienating and concealing effects of “the Machine.” Birdwatching reveals the vibrancy and agency of nature, modelling an openness to its self-presencing which leads back to the earth and refamiliarizes the birdwatcher with his being-in-the-world. Birdwatching thus emerges as an alternative way of being with especial import in these times in which the loss of our natural-world bearings is keenly felt.

The nature of this alternative way of being is developed in Chapter Two, which examines the “poethics” of birdwatching. These poietic principles and practices modelled in and by Thomas’s poetry enable dwelling – that is, the preserving of the fourfold in its “essential being” and self “presencing” (Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking” 150) – as they bring forth the unconcealed ground of being which Thomas thinks of as God or “ultimate reality.” Birdwatching becomes seen as an eco-spiritual practice and a metaphor for a way of looking which allows one to see beyond the world of the divided self, beyond the fractured world of the Machine, into being-itself. Birdwatching constitutes a visionary experience which counters the dualistic legacy and rigid empiricism of this “scientific” and “mechanized, impersonal
age” (Prose 93). This closely aligns the poiesis of birdwatching with a religious mode of being.

Chapter Three further explores how poiesis is religious. Here we circle back to account for Thomas’s conception of God as the ground and unity of being and the ecological implications of his “Gaian Spirituality” – a classification developed by Bron Taylor in Dark Green Religion as the spiritualistic counterpart to James Lovelock’s explicitly scientific “Gaia theory.” Thomas’s conception of God provides a point of connection, rather than opposition, between science and religion, paving the way for more ecological religious and scientific dialogue. The material-spiritual unity that consequently emerges is also crucial to further understanding human being-in-the-world. Moreover, his “regrounding” of religion conveys the presence of God in the earth and thus preserves its sacredness from within today’s scientific world. The poiesis of birdwatching fulfils this religious role by bringing forth God as the ground and unity of being, responding to the modern spiritual vacuum in which, as Heidegger states, “no god any longer gathers men and things unto himself” and thus “there fails to appear for the world the ground that grounds it” (“What are poets for?” 91–92). The poiesis of birdwatching is therefore not only where science and religion intersect but is imbued with the religious properties which Heidegger attributes to poetry – that which “trace[s] . . . the fugitive gods” (94).

The way the birdwatcher-priest’s conception of God is informed by his close acquaintance with the brutal and bloody processes of the natural world is the focus of Chapter Four. Here the poiesis of birdwatching is shown in Thomas’s openness to the unity of being beneath this material existence or, in other words, how God reveals Himself through the world of nature. This
vision of God is repeatedly synthesized in the sublime beauty and violence of the bird of prey – an image which encapsulates the wildness of God in contrast to the ways His presence is delimited and domesticated by anthropocentric conceptions separating the spiritual from the material. Thomas challenges the materialist’s mechanistic world with the regrounded God of that “machine.” This provides a way to re-conceive the unity of being and the human place within it. The birdwatcher’s acceptance of the wild – of physis – stands against society’s growing domestication from the wild, something which Thomas holds responsible for our domestication from the wild God of the world and the sacramental unity of which we are a part.

Chapter Five enlarges this discussion of God’s wildness, exploring the poietic role of birds and birdwatching in opening up the unknowable vastness and presence of the Divine. Here we explore how rather than being an anthropomorphic being to whom one prays or preys upon, God preys upon the mind and senses as something we can momentarily experience but never fully comprehend. Birds of prey thus become “birds of pray” as they evoke God’s otherness to human definition – or “preying” – and thus the need for new conceptions of prayer and of the human experience of dwelling within Divine presence. Thomas’s emphasis on unknowability brings forth God’s undelimited being as the ground of being – that is, in ecocritical terms, the undelimited ground of our being that is the earth or ecocosmic dimensions of our being. God’s unknowability becomes an expression of His grace, a way to open up rather than restrict the presence of the spiritual in an otherwise desacralized world.

Finally, Chapter Six looks at the role of birds and birdwatching when it comes to the nation of Wales. Here the poiesis of birdwatching is of eco-
national importance, the sense of unity for which it strives being something
upon which the survival of Wales and the iconic Welsh farmer – Thomas’s
embodiment of natural authenticity and connection with the earth – depend.
In particular, birdwatching is a highly politicized response to the way that
Wales’s “post-colonial” problems are environmental problems. The
birdwatcher’s openness to the self-disclosing natural world offers a way of
resisting the colonial machine and how it conceals, silences, and exploits the
nation, the earth, and the soul of the human united with it. “Wales,” then, is
not just a nation but a microcosm for the earth. In its opposition to “England”
and “the Machine,” Wales is the dwelling place, an ideal for which to strive.
This greater context helps redeem Thomas’s nationalism or “eco-fascism” – a
problematic aspect of his work even though, as Rigby says of Heidegger, it is
more about dwelling than an “irrationalist cult of blood and soil” (“Earth,
World, Text” 433).

Ultimately, the Wales Thomas longs for is captured in Abercuawg, that
“transfigured” Wales which is not just a nation, nor any one place, but a state
of unity. Abercuawg is the timeless centre of existence in which the
birdwatcher seeks to dwell; it is the where the cuckoo – a bird that is
disappearing from the British countryside – sings in an endless spring.

As this thesis demonstrates, the search for Abercuawg underlies R. S.
Thomas’s poetry and the poiesis of birdwatching plays a key role in this quest.
Thus, birdwatching is an illuminating lens through which to study Thomas’s
philosophical response to that unity – to “God” or “nature” – as well as the
practice through which the birdwatcher-poet experienced it.

This last point is especially important to remember, here at the start of
a literary treatise. As Greg Garrard reminds us, the ecocritic must “keep one
eye on the ways in which ‘nature’ is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse” (10).

For a poet so immersed in the natural world, birdwatching and the quest for Abercuawg cannot only be poetic motifs or conceits. Birdwatching is first and foremost a way of looking at and being in the world before it is something academic and conceptual. Remembering this should remind us of the source of the poems – the birds – and call the reader into a more profound relationship with the earth just as the poems do. This should also suggest to us that Abercuawg is something we might seek – a vision which the poet leads us toward, not just an idea upon which to discourse. In turn, birdwatching may be a vital way for us to join in the never-ending search for Abercuawg and preserve its possibility.
Chapter 1: Birds and Jets

Above them the aircraft
Domesticate the huge sky.

“Young and Old,” CP 237

In 1967 R. S. Thomas and his wife Elsi moved to the tip of the Llŷn Peninsula in rural Wales. Thomas had taken his last benefice at the twelfth-century church of St. Hywyn’s, in the tiny seaside village of Aberdaron, but the relocation was also influenced, like the one before it, by the poet’s love for birdwatching. Llŷn was situated on a major migration route, of which Thomas writes: “I loved the feeling of being right at the end of the peninsula, where I could slip out to the headland and watch the sea birds migrating in spring and autumn” (AE 18). A few years earlier he had begun his association with the bird observatory recently established, a few miles from the tip of the peninsula, on Bardsey Island. This was an island “pervaded by memories of Celtic Christianity and pilgrims,” writes Thomas (AE 16). It was a timeless “green / island, ringed with the rain’s / bow” (“That Place,” LS 8).

Thus, the other pull of Llŷn was Thomas’s search for his “rare bird” (“Sea-watching,” CP 306), his hidden God which was to be found, or rather experienced, in moments of fullness and undivided being. Concerned throughout his career by “the problem of the widening of the gap between man and earth in the present era” (The Poet’s Voice 1), Thomas saw Llŷn as offering a deeper material and spiritual vision of man’s dwelling upon the earth and all that threatened it.
But in coming to Llŷn, Thomas did not escape what he calls the “Machine,” that which was responsible for the widening gap between man and nature. Instead, he encountered another “engine” breaking the “Mirror of silence” (“Cynddylan on a Tractor,” CP 30). This was the horde of tourists who, as part of the capitalist-industrialist Machine, were commoditizing and consuming the peninsula. Symptomatic of the Machine’s effect on human consciousness and habitation of the earth, these tourists saw the peninsula as no more than an exploitable resource. Moreover, more worryingly, as an inescapable “emphasis of the twentieth century,” there was the persistent “roar of planes overhead as the Royal Air Force practiced for the next war” (AE 16). The planes, which broke the peninsula’s “rare peace,” as Thomas writes in “Retirement” (CP 503), reminded him of that abyss,

deeper than sea or sky, civilisation

could fall into.

This was the abyss of modern meaninglessness and dislocation from which “love and truth” had flown — a pit the poet had precipitously peered into, as the stanza break enacts above. In a time of Cold War tension, Thomas believed that the planes were “a reminder of the uneasy peace that exists between east and west, and of the fact that if war were to break out, it would inevitably deteriorate into nuclear holocaust” (AE 19). How had it come to this was the question Thomas pondered. How had man’s disconnection from the earth, and thus from his own being-in-the-world, led to this point where, as he writes in his “Unity” lecture,
by looking at the order of nature as something which existed primarily for the sake of man, and thus as something to be exploited by him, man has created a situation in which the Earth’s resources are rapidly being depleted, in which the environment is being defiled, and in which man himself has the power to destroy all living things on Earth, including himself.

(33)

Thus, on the peninsula Thomas renewed his contemplation of the modern world and how it was out of touch with the earth, God, and the unity of being – these being one and the same for the poet. Here birdwatching became more important than ever as a practice devoted to “dwelling” in the unity of being in the face of the overwhelming noise of the Machine. To “dwell,” according to Heidegger’s usage, is to “preserve and care” for the earth in “its essential being” and self “presencing” (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 147, 150). Jonathan Bate describes this as an “authentic form of being” achieved not when we represent the world, . . . but when we stand in a site, open to its Being, when we are thrown or called; [and] the site is then gathered into a whole for which we take on an insistent care. (The Song of the Earth 55)

For Thomas, dwelling involves “re-attunement” to the vibrancy of nature. Accordingly, birdwatching forms a crucial response to ways of looking “at the order of nature” which distance man from the earth and his being in it. As well as a practice, birdwatching is an idea or conceit for an alternative way of looking and being which enables dwelling and a sense of one’s being-in-the-world.
However, as Kate Rigby explains, dwelling “involves an attunement to the given” but is “itself not given” (“Earth, World, Text” 432), meaning that our fractured, self-conscious being – the way that humans are simultaneously part of yet apart from nature – requires a “conscious commitment” to dwelling, rather than it being an attunement to the earth’s self-presencing which comes “naturally.” Dwelling is frustrated by the “often subconscious” ways in which we “as human beings, dwell in and order the world,” Rigby says.

Birdwatching, however, fulfils that “conscious commitment” for Thomas, forming an important response to the ways in which the Machine hinders dwelling and a sense of one’s being-in-the-world. Ultimately, the Machine is “Thomas’s shorthand” for the “unimaginative/stereotypical thinking of globalized consumerism in which the individual” – along with the rest of the natural world – “becomes merely a unit of production and consumption,” in Tony Brown’s words (R. S. Thomas 75–76). “Thomas’s Machine represents the life-denying capacity of the mechanical” and the “industrial and technological processes” which run the world.

The Poiesis of Birdwatching

In her discussion of Heidegger, Rigby explains that poiesis is a “bringing forth, which does not challenge by enframing, but which lets things be in their obscure otherness in the very process of revealing them” (“Earth, World, Text” 430). Significantly, Rigby also explains that poiesis is “not confined to artistic practice. . . . [but] extends ultimately to a whole way of life. As such [poiesis] is a form of praxis: that of knowing how to dwell.” Over the
next two chapters we will see how birdwatching fulfils this practice and “bringing forth” that is poiesis.

In Thomas’s writing birdwatching displays certain ethics or principles which help the birdwatcher see through delimiting ways of looking that insulate us from our being-in-the-world. These ethics, which I refer to as the “poethics” of birdwatching – because they reflect poiesis in action – promote attunement to the more-than-human world and God as the ground of being. Poethics such as re-encountering one’s embodied being; re-envisioning silence or absence as presence and agency; and openness and wonder before the self-disclosing of the world, free things into their own being or self-presencing. The poethics of birdwatching resist the thinking set-up by the Machine which reduces, silences, and obscures the being-there of the world.

On the Llyn peninsula, the tension between the “rare peace” of unity and the “buzz” of aeroplanes, as Thomas puts it in “Retirement,” made birdwatching a conscious commitment to “stand in a site, open to its Being” and dwell. In the same poem, the presence of the Machine is also felt in the “[s]trangers” that “advance” along the peninsula, commoditizing the location and bending it “further away from the scent / of the cloud blossom.” This spiritual dearth makes the birdwatcher cling to his “position” – his faith in those “times” of dwelling when an undefined presence or greater reality is sensed “clinging” closely and reassuringly to him – that

love and truth have

no wings, but are resident

like me here, practise
ting

their sub-song quietly in the face
of the bitterest of winters.⁵

The birdwatcher is also “practising” – that is, carrying-out, singing, and learning – the “sub-song” of “love and truth” and an alternative way of being, as the line-break suggests. He is committed to remembering this, amidst and against a metaphorical winter that is implicitly (hopefully) seasonal, so that he may dwell contentedly. The birdwatcher, in “witnessing / / the seasonal migrations,” also witnesses to his “position,” to the being-there of “love and truth” – be it God, being, or that “rare peace” – beneath the noise of “civilisation.” Thus, there is something of the martyr and the prophet in the birdwatcher.

The birdwatcher’s commitment to dwelling and caring for the world comes together in Thomas’s “Autobiographical Essay,” where he reflects on how Llyn was far from an escape.⁶ “Although I live in a secluded and beautiful part of Wales, the peace is shattered most days by jet aircraft practicing overhead,” he writes (AE 19). As a reminder of the potential for “nuclear holocaust,” Thomas notes that this “really makes it impossible to sit back and contemplate one’s navel. . . . there is the thought of all the wonderful and innocent forms of life that would be charred to ashes, if the worst should happen.”

Instead, through birds, Thomas contemplates how humankind exists upon the earth, widening the gap between us and our being-in-the-world. In “A Species” (UP 145-46) man’s “cacophonous music,” like the drone of

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⁵ The line “the bitterest of winters” may refer to the Cold War and the threat of nuclear winter. The poem was published in the collection Experimenting with an Amen in 1986, at the later end of this period.

⁶ Cf. This sentiment is also affirmed in “Retirement,” where the poet writes: “From what was I escaping?”
aerialcraft, has dystopian implications. 7 The human inability to dwell leads us, “In the absence of such wings / as were denied us,” to “insist / on inheriting others from the machine.” Therefore, unlike birds, which are true to their being,

The eggs that we incubate bring forth
in addition to saints monsters,
the featherless brood whose one thing
in common with dunnocks is
that they do not migrate.

The diabolic fighter jets arise from human nature as a perverse kind of bird which engineers an unnatural being for itself. The machine allows man to transcend his natural being due to the sense of privilege and exceptionalism that it fosters.

Thomas turns to birds as an alternative, a way to dwell in the reassuring, life-affirming continuity of natural process. In his third-person autobiography No-one, he writes:

In his imagination the associations of the Lŷn Peninsula were those of history and spiritual retreat, but having arrived he found that it was an air force practice area. The deafening roar of the aeroplanes was certain to kill any attempt to live in the past. . . In the face of all this, R. S. well knew why he had become more and more interested in birds. Since the spirit of the countryside had weakened, since its beauty was being destroyed by modern

7 Nb. this poem appears in a shorter form as “Incubation” in Thomas’s 1995 publication No Truce With The Furies, along with another, different poem entitled “A Species.” These two poems are collected in the Collected Later Poems on pages 259 and 247 respectively.
developments, one of the few pleasures remaining there was to see some of the creatures still going about their traditional business. Birds existed millions of years before the advent of man. They are beautiful and full of life, and have adapted perfectly to their own needs. Man has for ages yearned to be able to fly, and at last he has succeeded at the expense of exhausting the earth of its resources and polluting it, and of filling the sky with unbearable tumult. Twice a year millions of birds rise into the air without much noise, without any harmful effect on the environment, to winter in warmer countries for a few months and to return in the spring to raise a new family. (A 99–100)

Thus birdwatching becomes associated with dwelling and a way to dwell, in opposition to human mechanical hubris. In particular, birdwatching is about “being” in the undelimited “ambience” that is the earth – Timothy Morton’s term for the “circumambient, or surrounding, world. . . . something material and physical, though somewhat intangible” which goes beyond the delimiting conceptions of “nature” which the Machine enables (Ecology Without Nature 33–34).

The Machine

Thomas’s concerns about the Machine as an ecological (and colonial) aggressor whose “tumult” in the skies above Llŷn was “drowning the song of the birds” (A 126) began to emerge in his second volume of poetry, An Acre of Land (1952). When birds are associated with dwelling, and the spring season with rebirth and connection to natural process – Hopkins’s “dearest freshness
deep down things” (“God’s Grandeur,” Poems 70) – the threat of the Machine lies in its misdirection. In particular, Thomas explains that his “main criticism” is that “the machine is de-humanising. It also insulates man from natural processes” (“Probings” 43–44).

The apparent silence and emptiness of the more-than-human world has traditionally justified its exploitation as mere matter “devoid,” in Kate Rigby’s words, “of ethical considerability” (“Romanticism and Ecocriticism” 63). Thomas’s early poem “Cynddylan on a Tractor” (CP 30) dramatizes how nature is emptied by the assumption of its emptiness. As Cynddylan goes to work, the tractor’s din impairs his hearing so that the birds sing “in vain.” Thus, the farmer rides to work as though to war, physically disconnected from the earth:

He is the knight at arms breaking the fields’
Mirror of silence, emptying the wood
Of foxes and squirrels and bright jays.

Against the machine’s wall of noise the fields seem to reflect or resemble silence for the farmer, but in fact there is vibrant life here in the unheard birds singing to him and to the other inhabitants with whom he shares the world. The machine causes the farmer to break his timeless contract with the earth and therefore his integrity and union with nature, whereby he is ironically dehumanized:

He’s a new man now, part of the machine,
His nerves of metal and his blood oil.

The sun comes over the tall trees
Kindling all the hedges, but not for him
Who runs his engine on a different fuel.

The machine’s domination separates the farmer from nature and his being in it, including the diverse ways that nature does not merely supply but *is* his “fuel.” The poem suggests that “the old look that yoked [Cynddylan] to the soil” has been replaced by a false, self-destructive ignorance.

By breaking the fields, like a master breaking-in a slave, the farmer upends the characteristic relationship of Thomas’s farmer with the land; a relationship of humble, heroic, enduring – and even bleak – submission to the natural order. As Rigby notes, “the standpoint of human mastery silences Earth’s cry” (“Writing in the Anthropocene” 182).

Christopher Manes explains that the process by which nature turns from being “a voluble subject to a mute object” has been simultaneous with Western colonial expansion, scientific development, and “claims . . . about human difference, rationality, and transcendence” (“Nature and Silence” 17). Initially, most societies “considered nature replete with speaking subjects of the nonhuman kind, subjects that humans, for their own good, listened to and understood” (“A Natural History of Silence” 191). However, the rise of “mercantile institutions” that “understood that their power derived . . . from manipulating the physical world,” Manes continues, saw science utilized for a “particular knowledge about the real” that would “maximise” profit (193–194). Furthermore, Manes explains that the “experimental method” that emerged in Renaissance science “introduced a new limit to the speaking,” and thus self-disclosing “of nature” (194). “For the scientist-inquisitor, nature has no voice of its own; it can merely respond to human interrogatories with a simple yea or nay.” In this new approach, “the people who formulated the questions . . .
determined in advance the type of knowledge worth learning” and limited the being-there of nature itself.

In light of this, R. S. Thomas states that

[i]t is of applied science as manifest in technology that I am suspicious[,] with its reductionist tendencies, and [I] positively dislike its prostitution to the money power” (“Probings” 43).

Regarding issues of authentic being, and of approaching what he refers to as “ultimate reality” – his term for the ground of being or “what we call God” (Ormond 54) – Thomas continues that “it is not pure science and religion that are irreconcilable, but a profit-making attitude to all technology” (“Probings” 43). Scientific methods which seek only knowledge deemed to be “worth learning” (Manes’s pun is emphasized) limit the vast unaccountability, vibrancy, and agency of nature, making it a simple resource for the taking. This is self-destructive since we are, in the end, part of nature.

Similarly, presuming to know nature supports ideologies of human difference and exceptionality. The accompanying sense of power over nature obstructs one’s awareness of being in nature and seemingly entitled to its available resources. As we will see later in “The Place” (CP 207), Thomas’s “method” and “business” is to watch the house martins fly, “not as a man vowed / To science” but one who would, receptively, “have them about myself.”

Knowledge and hubris grow closely together for Thomas. In “Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man” (CP 407–409), one of the signs that the blackbirds’ Edenic garden of unity has “arrived / at the knowledge of / good and evil” is that “there is a man in it.” The man is self-centred and ignorant of nature’s volubility. The “darkness” of his “shadow” stretches “from horizon / to
horizon” as he asserts his dominance. Although he is the minority, because of his fallen self-knowledge, the man acts as if he is alone in the world. While the blackbirds’ singing has implicitly let things be, the “garden is disturbed” when the man later begins to whistle “expecting / everything to come to him,” as though it is under his control. As man asserts his voice over the natural world he disturbs its mirror of silence instead of attuning himself with it. The machine then appears – outside of the natural order in which “there are / eggs and there are / blackbirds” – as man’s attempt, out of his inability to dwell, to “incubate a solution” to his being “without feathers.” The machine further distances him from nature and his natural being. Thus, the blackbirds worry at the man’s ability to “reticulat[e],” as they do, his “air-space” – a word which may recall Thomas’s nuclear concerns. Notably, even God does not have control over the machine in “Other” (CP 235): it ignores His command, continuing to sing “to itself of money.” Its song is “the web” in which the villagers in the poem are caught “To be sucked empty,” ruined both financially and in terms of their natural integrity.

The way that technology and applied science drown out the voice of nature relates to the “enframing” of nature. In Kate Rigby’s words, this is “the process whereby modern technology transforms things into standing reserve,” challenging and silencing the “phusis” or “self-disclosure of natural entities” (“Earth, World, Text” 429). “Technological man orders the world, challenges it, ‘enframes’ it,” explains Jonathan Bate. “Enframing means making everything part of a system, thus obliterating the unconcealed being-there of particular things” (The Song of the Earth 255). Nature becomes known as a separate resource “to be extracted, utterly available and infinitely
manipulable” (Rigby 429). As we lose sight of nature itself we become increasingly alienated from our being-in-the-world.

Enframing arises because technology is not only instrumental but, as Heidegger explains, “a mode of revealing” (“The Question Concerning Technology” 319). However, the difference between the way modern technology reveals the world, as opposed to art or other kinds of poiesis, is that rather than being the “bringing-forth” of something either from “out of itself” (317) or through an artist, modern technology “challenges” and “conceals the truth of things” (Bate 255). While a tree discloses itself and the work of art discloses the artist’s “bringing-forth” of it as an echo of the original, modern technology leads away from the tree’s essential being, converting it, for example, into timber, something that exists only in terms of commercial and industrial value. As Bate says, a forest thus becomes forestry as “the solidity of things is replaced by the evanescence of commodities” (264). Ultimately, Thomas critiques the way that modern technology reveals the world, subsequently affecting the human relationship with it and sense of being-in-the-world.

When the world is represented in terms of “standing reserve,” Rigby suggests, this endangers “our relationship to Being” by concealing the unity of being (“Earth, World, Text” 431). “The more technologically enframed our world becomes,” she explains, “the more completely we block the way to what Heidegger . . . terms ‘the Open,’” that is, “all that is undelimited” or “that which is given” (430–31). “The rule of enframing,” as Heidegger states, “threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more final truth” (“The Question Concerning Technology” 333). That “truth” is the self-
revealing and “unconcealment” of the world in which we dwell. For Thomas, it is the sacred unity of being, God, and the truth of one’s being-in-the-world.

The danger of enframing and how it blocks the way to “truth” is seen in “Retirement” and “Cynddylan on a Tractor,” where the machine shatters, respectively, the sense of presence and “rare peace” and the “fields’ / Mirror of silence.” The tractor blocks Cynddylan from the presence – and presences – of the countryside. Where Thomas’s farmer is often prototypically rooted in the land here his identity “yoked . . . to the soil” is lost. As the rhyme reinforces, rather than drawing his very being from the earth, Cynddylan now sustains himself with “oil.” He becomes a casualty of the Machine, losing his humanity and becoming a dependent component – an enframed “engine” or resource – of the consumerist world. The Machine’s consuming, resource-driven worldview converts the farmer from his original being in the soil to something alien. He is no longer part of an ecosystem but part of a system that orders the earth according to human difference from it, a system bent upon maximising profits and gains rather than dwelling. Thus, “Cynddylan” demonstrates how modern technology, as Jonathan Bate says, “is a mode of being which has the potential to convert even humans into standing-reserve” (254).

Elsewhere, Thomas writes of the farmer thus:

[...]
His gaze deep in the dark soil,
As are his feet. The soil is all;
His hands fondle it, and his bones
Are formed out of it with the swedes.
And if sometimes the knife errs,
Burying itself in his shocked flesh,
Then out of the wound the blood seeps home
To the warm soil from which it came. (“Soil,” SYT 64)
Thus the Machine not only drowns out nature but obscures human connection to it. Enframing leads us to see distinction rather than the interweaving ambience of the ground of being. We see silence, absence, and emptiness instead of presence and fullness. Instead of standing in that site gathered into a whole – the vast “mesh of interconnected things,” as Morton describes, in which “Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully ‘itself’” and thus our “encounter with other beings becomes more profound” (The Ecological Thought 15) – we see resources, objects deprived of autonomy and interconnection with us. Enframing therefore sets the human outside of nature as its orderer and controller; it delimits how far nature extends to human being. Enframing reinforces the idea of “division between nature and consciousness” (Bate 263).

Of course, in being distanced from nature as the ground of one’s being it becomes possible to disregard, desacralise, and destroy it and so ourselves, like Cynddylan. Thomas, as we have seen, worries about the extreme, nuclear fall-out of this disconnectedness. Furthermore, as Rigby says, “[i]n reducing Earth to the status of a mere resource under human sway we become insouciant to . . . [its] suffering” (“Writing in the Anthropocene” 182). In contrast the poiesis of birdwatching endeavours to bring forth the self-presencing of the natural world and of the unity of being. As we will see, one crucial way in which it does this is its openness to the agency and “physis” of nature – the “highest” kind of poiesis, according to Heidegger (“The Question Concerning Technology” 317), as that which is “the arising of something from out of itself.”

In a passage from No-one the effects of the Machine are further outlined:
Wales today is a land of pylons and wires, a land of television masts and police poles, a land of new roads full of visitors rushing to the sea, where the planted forests and the caravan parks are fast swallowing the remaining open ground. (A 99)

Thomas contemplates how the Welsh landscape has been overwritten by the Machine. The Machine physically hides the land itself, converting it into and consuming it as a tourist commodity. “[P]lanted forests” refers to the commercial forestry to which Welsh landscapes have been reduced and put to use, a problem which Thomas addresses in his poem “Afforestation” (CP 130).

Meanwhile, a similar picture of how nature (and nation) has been enframed occurs in “Gone?” (CP 348), where the invasion of a technological culture masks the being-there of nature, transforms the countryside, and prevents dwelling. The speaker sees

hedges
uprooted, walls gone, a mobile people
hurrying to and fro on their fast tractors; a forest of aerials
as though an invading fleet invisibly
had come to anchor among these financed hills.

Land, where Thomas’s recurring farmer-figure, Iago Prytherch, once worked in un-mechanized union with the earth, has been broken and “financed.” The speaker observes the “flogged acres / of ploughland” that have been exploited, broken, and sold-off. People disconnected from their environment hurry about on tractors, uprooting and altering the landscape in the name of development and profit.
The presence of a self-revealing nature has been drowned out for this mechanically-invaded “people.” The “forest of aerials” evokes the effacement of nature from human vision: the takeover of the landscape by the Machine and the way that technology replaces the being-there of nature. The speaker worries about the progressive alienation from the land that the Machine enables. He wonders what people will say on “some future / occasion” as they look “over” – as though from a distance, with a surveyor’s eye – a landscape in which all trace of “Prytherch country” and the farmer’s way of dwelling is gone. He doubts that future onlookers will realize what has gone or therefore understand an alternative relationship to the land. Rather, the world of the Machine is preoccupied with itself. The people

copy the image

of themselves projected on their smooth
screens to the accompaniment of inane
music. They give grins and smiles
back in return for the money that is
spent on them.

The world is awake only to itself; its “smooth screens” delimit and challenge human being, as well as distract people from their being-in-the-world. Thomas also seems to suggest that these people are involved in the production and consumption of the capitalist Machine, multiplying and forfeiting personal, authentic being in a perverse self-commoditization. The people “copy” an “image” of human being in the modern world, projected by their technology.

**Birdwatching on the Coto Doñana**
Thomas notably describes the Machine as his “symbol for a robotic takeover” (“Probings” 43–44). As we have seen, the Machine domesticates nature, producing a sense of one’s being above or outside of it. This distortion, and the subsequent exploitation of nature, insulates humanity from natural process and authentic, human being-in-the-world.

Thomas’s birdwatching reflects a response to the “world” of the Machine “that is forced upon us” (“Probings” 44) or, in Wordsworth’s secular-materialist terms, the “world” that “is too much with us” (MW 270). Through birdwatching Thomas resists what one critic refers to as the “false consciousness” spread by the Machine (Ned Thomas 57).

In an interview, Thomas reflects on how the Machine physically blots out nature. He remembers enjoying the “darkness” of the countryside “in which one could see the wealth of the stars” before “the lights and glow from the cities and village street lamps” began “hiding” them (“Probings” 41–42). “The wild places are becoming domesticated. Time and distance are being annihilated by speed,” he says, “So I turned to the birds.”

Thomas’s response was as much for relief as to retain a deeper awareness of his being-in-the-world. In birdwatching he turned from the disease and mad dance of the Machine to the dance of life:

Instead of being asked in to a modernised cottage with the television’s St Vitus’s dance in the corner, I went out seeking birds, especially migrant ones. They belong to the open spaces. Over millions of years they have kept to the fly-ways . . . Their conquest of the air through flight has been achieved without any
of the uproar and drain on Earth’s resources with which man hurtles through space. (“Probings” 41–42)

Thomas sought the natural “open spaces” where the Machine was absent. He turned from the domestic world with its “smooth screens” to the wild; away from man’s conquest, domestication, uproar, and exploitation to birds and their contrasting way of being. In birdwatching, Thomas turns aside from man’s restlessness in the face of a mortal, limited view of time, to the eternal unity of being in which he dwells.

It is therefore revealing to consider Sarn, the damp and freezing cottage in Rhiw to which Thomas re-located in retirement. The cottage, a short way from Aberdaron, had almost no modern conveniences or domestic comforts. This four hundred year-old structure above the wild bay known as Hell’s Mouth questions the boundaries of inside and outside, domestic and wild. Its interior windowsills are still littered with dead birds. Thomas only had to step outside with his binoculars to winnow the spectacular coastline for birds. His biographer, Byron Rogers, writes evocatively: “The coast road that runs past it has now collapsed and ends in air” (262). Rogers completes the picture of Sarn’s primitive appeal:

The house is built into a wooded hillside, the contours of which it follows so completely it could be a natural feature in the land until you notice a building there among the stones and the trees. Only this is a building out of recorded time, this is Neolithic . . . the boulders in its walls four feet wide, three feet thick, some of them, estimated Thomas, weighing a ton. (263)

Twelve years earlier in 1966, Thomas undertook a birdwatching expedition in pursuit, one might say, of the “deep peace / Of wild places”
(“The Untamed,” *CP* 140). The circumstances surrounding the trip to the Coto Doñana in Spain, and Thomas’s reflections upon it, embody the poiesis of birdwatching. Significantly, the trip was funded by a prize for poetry, adding to the sense that birdwatching is fundamental to Thomas’s poetic vision. As his companion, the Welsh naturalist William (Bill) Condry also explains, the money was intended to “broaden the poet’s mind” (“*A Rare Bird*”: R. S. Thomas). It was left to the recipient to decide how this should be achieved and it is telling that Thomas chose to add to his life-list of birds. In his account of the trip, Bill Condry writes that Thomas

> took a somewhat narrow view of what would broaden his [mind]: he saw it as an opportunity of adding to his life-list of birds. ‘Tick hunting’ is what bird-watchers call it. You carry a card with a list of all the birds on it and you happily tick them off as you spot them. (*Pathway to the Wild* 93–94).

The trip represents Thomas’s conscious commitment to dwell; an attempt to “broaden” his mind against the “false consciousness” of the Machine. Thomas’s field card from his expedition (fig. 1), and its contribution to his life-list, testify to a life lived *with* birds in “open spaces.” Tick hunting is far from the “fatuous occupation” that Condry concedes it might seem; rather, in a world like that in “Gone?” one might call it subversive. By turning from the distracted, technological world that encounters only itself, Thomas turns to what he elsewhere calls nature’s “primary” truth (*CP* 55) – the uncompromising, primordial being-there of nature or “God,” the ground of being. In this light, birdwatching is not an escape from the modern world so much as a re-acquaintance with the foundations of the latter. In the face of this world, Thomas seeks, to borrow another phrase from “The Untamed,” the
mind’s “true eyrie.” His birdwatching trip therefore belongs to the tradition of Romantic poets broadening their minds through experiences in the wild – but without entirely evoking what ecocriticism has found to be the problematic “idea of wilderness” as “always ‘over there’” (Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* 113) from civilization, a conception which the modern technological world reinforces.

Fig. 1: Front page of R. S. Thomas’s Field Card for France and Spain 1966, and page listing Thomas’s rare Thekla lark. Found inside Thomas’s copy of *The Handbook of British Birds* (Vol. II) held at the R. S. Thomas Study Centre at Bangor University. Photograph by the author.
In the poem “Coto Doñana” (NBF 35), Thomas conveys a primitive and ancient world in which life and death are starkly intertwined like snakes coiling “about the bones / Of the carrion.” The poem’s speaker is disoriented by this place from the beginning. Having lost his footing temporally and geographically, he can only reply: “I don’t know; ask the place. / It was there when we found it,” in response to a question that is external to the poem and the timeless other world it describes. The explorer has returned with no answers, but as the vast and bare landscape becomes abundant with life, the seemingly visionary impression it made on him emerges:

There are great birds
There that stain the sand
With their shadows, and snakes coil
Their necklaces about the bones
Of the carrion. At night the wild
Boars plough by their tusks’
Moonlight, and fierce insects
Sing, drilling for the blood
Of the humans, whom time’s sea
Has left there to ride and dream.

His vision is held together by the repetition of “there” which namelessly evokes a wonder renewed upon remembrance, and a mysterious place that is somewhere and something else. Meanwhile, the aural repetition of “their/there” conflates place and presence in a part of the world where nature is not silent or hidden, not just an environment, but the encompassing mesh of beings and being, and belonging only to itself. Alliteration and consonance also guide the poem’s form, which moves by rhythmic phrase – not line – in a
trancelike manner from one sight and impression to the next. The concluding couplet completes the sense of a mystical journey on the outskirts of time; a dream removed from the quotidian details of the first stanza. The speaker has become immersed, all over again, in the wild.

The importance of the Coto lies not in having seen and known it, but rather its freedom from human noise and determination. The opening line “I don’t know; ask the place” becomes crucial, signifying not just a baffled avoidance of questions and answers. The Coto is allowed to speak for and reveal itself; it is granted agency and autonomy. As the speaker moves from his opening topographical description to the animated portrait quoted above, deep and dreamy imagery suggests that there is more going on than he can or will explain. He has simply been “left there to ride and dream,” as though marooned by external forces. Indeed, despite reflecting on the Coto from the distance of time and somewhere else, the speaker suggests that he is still there in some way. He has switched, in the second stanza, to the present tense, and in the last line he seems to transcend time and distance to remain mystically connected to this place. Perhaps, having experienced the ground of being there, this deep level of dwelling cannot be forgotten. He and Condry are just another species caught within the drama of life on the Coto. Snakes “coil,” boars “plough,” and insects “sing” and “drill” as life unfolds. The “bones / Of the carrion” signal an encounter with mortality, corporeality, and natural process. In its imagery and aural and rhythmic patterns the poem reinforces the poet’s acceptance of balance and continuity in the natural order. The closing couplet evokes a mode of being that is in keeping with the speaker’s initial reluctance to synthesise, analyse, or overwrite the Coto. Thus, in relation to the ecocritical trouble with the idea of wilderness, which evokes a
nature/culture dualism at odds with Thomas’s focus on the unity of being, the significance of the Coto extends beyond its physical remove from modern civilization. The speaker’s experience is not of nature as some metaphysical construct always “over there” from the human world, but of the primordial, enveloping natural world which is unmistakably “primary.”

But the trip to Spain not only links the broadening of poetic perspective with birdwatching, its inspiration was itself literary in origin. “I had been reading Guy Mountfort’s *Portrait of a Wilderness*, a description of the Coto de Doñana in south Spain,” writes Thomas in his “Autobiographical Essay” (14). The book, published in 1958 by the eminent ornithologist and conservationist, fed Thomas’s “ornithomania,” to use Mountfort’s phrase (18). In language which echoes Thomas’s reasons for turning to birds, Mountfort writes: “I knew that by raising my binoculars in any direction I should see birds, living as they had done for countless generations, secure from man” (149).

Mountfort “described irresistibly this wildlife-rich region,” writes Condry (*Wildlife, My Life* 158), offering Thomas the ultimate wilderness experience. “We had decided to skip culture by avoiding the towns and camping out in the country,” Thomas recalls (*AE* 14). “There was still no proper road to the Coto, so it was, indeed, a wilderness with its myriads of birds and mosquitos, wild cattle and wild boars.”

The deep peace of the wild involves a deepened openness to the vibrancy of the more-than-human world in the absence of the insulating, dominating noise of the technological world. Mountfort would have resonated with Thomas, reflecting the same concerns of technologically-imprisoned man that we have seen in “Cynddylan” and “Gone?:

75
A new race of man has arisen, the town-dweller, who can no longer support separation from the mechanized paraphernalia of what today passes for a civilized existence. When he visits the country he deliberately takes with him the shackles binding him to the domestic, business and political preoccupations which have become an integral part of his life. Lest he sever them he is loth to stray far from a telephone, a radio set and his favourite newspaper. Above all he must not be alone to realize his state of helpless dependence. We all know at least a few such people, men and women who have lost their primitive love of the good earth and all it represents. (Mountfort 17–18)

In another interview Thomas views “the growth of conurbations” and cities that are “too big for people to be in contact with the earth, with the processes of nature” as “the supreme disaster” (“Interview with Simon Barker” 320).

In contrast, the prevailing sense of the wild, upon reading Thomas’s recollection in No-one, is of an unfamiliar, “magical atmosphere” (A 69). William Condry also relates a disorienting, mystical sense of place: “Then we entered a different world – of wide sands and aromatic unfamiliar bushes and scattered trees – the strangely beautiful, wild world of the Coto Doñana” (Pathway to the Wild 97). Spain was “exceptionally enchanting,” migrating birds “of all kinds [were] to be seen . . . many of them totally new to R. S.” (A 69). It was Thomas’s first experience of being in the middle of a wilderness. There were eagles, kites, shrikes, herons of all kinds and hundreds of other unfamiliar birds. . . . Every morning R. S. would set out on a journey to a new part of the reserve. . . . And at night the
unfamiliar sounds of the wilderness would come to them as they lay in their tents. (A 70)

As is often the case when Thomas describes great hosts of birds, there is a sense of a world-shifting experience. Thomas reflects, in the third person: “Later on, thinking about the experience, he realised how the trip had shown him again . . . ‘what stuff his roots were made of’” (A 70). Thus, while the Coto supplies and to some extent signifies a “sharp distinction between the forces of culture and nature” – to use Greg Garrard’s phrase (Ecocriticism 60) – Thomas frames his expedition more as an opportunity for unrestricted contact with the earth, its more-than-human processes, and its diverse other-than-human entities.

Accordingly, Mountfort’s environmentalist concerns would also have resonated with the poet. He laments how the “relentless process of man’s influence on nature is taking place at an accelerating rate throughout the world” (17). His thoughts on the destruction of the “haunts and homes of the wild-life of this world” (13) broach the way that technology obscures the other-than-human world from human consciousness. “It is a sobering thought,” he writes, bringing home the significance of his experience, that it is now almost impossible to find a spot in the whole of crowded England where one may pass an hour without either seeing or hearing evidence of human enterprise. Ubiquitous aircraft drone across our skies. Electricity pylons, railway lines and roads march across what a brief century ago was virgin country. (17)

When Mountfort says that “the beauties and treasures of the Coto Doñana” impress on us “the importance to mankind of maintaining its preservation”
his argument is more than sentimental or conservational, it is ontological. The “importance” of the wild lies in its alterity as places or “spot[s]” where human beings can dwell, realizing their being-in-the-world rather than the reflection of themselves in the world they have created. The wild is where one may take on an awareness and concern for the earth. The act of exchanging the “green hills of Wales for what, in all but name, was a piece of the Sahara,” as Condry puts it (Wildlife, My Life 158), was about encountering the natural world in its barest, starkest form. Mountfort notes that “we in Britain have lost or destroyed so much of our natural heritage” (18). This was the result not simply of technological destruction but the way the Machine reveals nature. The Coto therefore offered Thomas the “profound peace” of one of the few remaining wildernesses in Europe “where nature remains unchallenged in all her splendour.”

Thomas values such rare “spot[s]” of wilderness as he finds in Wales for these reasons. The “rare peace” of Llŷn, in “Retirement,” is valuable precisely for its rareness, for the absence of the Machine in a land where it is ubiquitous. As Thomas writes in “Young and Old”: the “aircraft / Domesticate the huge sky” (CP 237).

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which such talk of wilderness remains problematic. While the appeal of wilderness and the impulse to seek it reflects Thomas’s motivation to encounter the natural world uncontaminated and unobscured by the Machine, wilderness preservationism can stand in tension with the framework of Heideggerian dwelling. In the way it continues to reinforce the modern nature/culture divide, wilderness, as the “ultimate landscape of authenticity” (Cronon 16), suggests that “nature is only authentic if we are entirely absent from it” (Garrard 70).
In Thomas’s case, however, the Heideggerian focus on envisaging a mode of collective, more-than-human flourishing remains. Furthermore, as we will repeatedly see, Thomas seeks landscapes in which people can encounter other-than-human entities and more-than-human processes on an everyday basis. As his Bird Book attests to, in Chapter Six, these experiences are never exclusive to exotic climes. Ultimately, Dana Phillips’s comments on the pastoral impulse – which is closely connected to the idea of wilderness – might help us assess Thomas’s quest for wilderness. As he writes, “[t]he assumption behind the pastoral impulse or process, and not the impulse or process itself, is what we must regard as faulty” (18). This impulse to seek and foster a sense of unity is an essential part of Thomas’s birdwatching.

In his account of the Coto Doñana expedition, Condry also suggests another way that birdwatching reinforces one’s being-in-the-world. Condry writes of his pleasure at finding a Queen of Spain butterfly that “had at last become a reality instead of a creature I had seen all my life only as a picture in books” (Pathway to the Wild 101). In her stirring memoir H is for Hawk Helen MacDonald sheds light on the significance of such revelations. Worrying about the effacement of “wild animals” from our “everyday lives” and their replacement by “images of themselves in print and on screen,” MacDonald writes that a live bird in front of us can “resist the meanings” we give it (181). Implicitly, this allows the beholder to confront the thing-itself.

Thomas sought his own particular “reality” in the Coto: his first Thekla’s lark. Thomas’s annotations in his copy of Roger Tory Peterson’s Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe, which is held at the R. S.

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9 Cf. Condry Pathway to the Wild p. 103.
Thomas Study Centre at Bangor University, point to the agency and autonomy of the bird itself. The field guide in general is a model for the difference between the thing-itself and its representation on the page. Thomas’s annotations reflect the insufficiency of the field guide’s notes and illustrations, as well as the inability of language to account for the thing-itself. He supplements the entry for Thekla’s lark with comparatives that not only fail to represent the bird but depend upon being in the field and comparing the lark in relation to others. It is “slightly smaller” than a crested lark, with a “thicker” bill and “darker + greyer + more cleanly streaked breast.” The annotations testify to an experience of the thing itself. The birdwatcher also accepts the agency of natural entities, going to a bird’s particular habitats rather than “expecting / everything to come to him” (CP 407). Rather than the “diminution of the world” that MacDonald sees in the modern world’s limited and circumscribed presencing of nature, birdwatching is about revelation for Thomas – as we will see in the following chapter. Condry uses words like “rejoiced” “enraptured” for other special bird sightings (Pathway to the Wild 94–95) while he also describes Thomas’s search for the lark in religious terms:

> With the sun burning in a cloudless sky I watched [R. S. Thomas’s] tall, straight figure get ever smaller as it reached the crest of a far dune and disappeared into the desert like some Old Testament prophet who would never be seen again on earth.

(Pathway to the Wild 103)

This disappearance will become increasingly significant as the birdwatcher’s commitment to being-in-the-world, and dwelling in the ground of being, take on religious proportions in the following chapters.
Ultimately, to see how things resist human meaning or enframing is to recover a sense of the more-than-human world and one’s place in it, rather than objective outsideness. When technology distances and sets-up human separateness from nature, the birdwatcher encounters its being-there, its self-disclosing agency. The realization of what is “other” to the human – not “known,” objectified, and therefore separate, according to human enframing – awakens a sense of the more-than-human world in which we dwell. Far from implying division, this awareness of other living presences begins to dissolve the idea that the natural world is separate, mute matter. Instead, we become entangled with it and this, as “Cynddylan on a Tractor” would seem to suggest in reverse, is the means of our humanization as part of nature.

Thus, the practical aspect of birdwatching involves realizing how the world is more than we make (of) it. Macdonald also writes that “there is a world of things out there . . . that we make sensible to us by giving them meanings that shore up our views of the world” (275). But, in understanding the limitation of this, she continues: “I’ve learned how you feel more human once you have known, even in your imagination, what it is like to be not.”

When nature is increasingly enframed and distanced we cannot help but see in Thomas’s tick-hunting a desire to encounter the thing-itself and his being-in-the-world.

“it is I they build”

In a 1980 radio broadcast Thomas reflects on how “out at the end of the peninsula there has been time to meditate on history and nature and the self’s place in them” (“The Living Poet” 9). Aberdaron was “somehow more ‘real’,”
he also says in his episode of the *South Bank Show* (Brown, *R. S. Thomas* 71), while in his “Autobiographical Essay” he speaks of moving to Llŷn as “like a return home” (15). Indeed, Llŷn brought back memories of his childhood by the sea in Anglesey, but it was also the most complete return to his home in the natural world. Yet how did Thomas conceive of his place in nature amidst the threat to being posed by the jets even here?

In response to the insulating effects of the Machine, the enframing of nature, and the obscuring of the relationship between human and nature, the poiesis of birdwatching reflects a conscious commitment to re-envision the agency of nature and “stand in a site, open to its Being.” Although Jane Bennett speaks of revitalizing human awareness of the agency of nonhuman “things” and physical phenomena – not specifically natural world entities – her words and ideas are important here. An ability to recognize the agency of these things and how they act upon us, she argues, might change how we politically perceive and relate to the world around us, leading to a fuller appreciation of the mesh of human and other forces – such as pollution or climate change, for instance – that affect us. The same is true for the otherwise silent, merely material world of nature. The ways that we enframe nature and parse “the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)” sustain, in Bennett’s words, “the fantasy that ‘we’ really are in charge” of it (vii, x). Moreover, “the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption” (xi).

However, an awareness of the “fuller range of . . . nonhuman powers circulating around and within” us calls for our “attentiveness,” given how they “can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us.” Thus, Bennett
seeks to blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman things. These ideas are integral to the poiesis of birdwatching and its revelation of the human being-in-the-world.

In “The Place” (CP 207) Thomas acknowledges the agency of the natural world and comprehends his unity with it. In the poem, house martins return to nest in the eaves of the vicarage at Aberdaron. The poet-birdwatcher contemplates them, but his “method” is to have the nest-building birds “about myself” and “fill with their / Movement.” The poem is given in full:

Summer is here.
Once more the house has its
Spray of martins, Proust’s fountain
Of small birds, whose light shadows
Come and go in the sunshine
Of the lawn as thoughts do
In the mind. Watching them fly
Is my business, not as a man vowed
To science, who counts their returns
To the rafters, or sifts their droppings
For facts, recording the wave-length
Of their screaming; my method is so
To have them about myself
Through the hours of this brief
Season and to fill with their
Movement, that it is I they build
In and bring up their young
To return to after the bitter
Migrations, knowing the site
Inviolate through its outward changes.

The speaker seeks to be caught up amidst – to “fill with” – the “fountain / Of small birds.” His “method” embraces the birds’ proximity but also his desire that they be “about” (reflect, constitute) him and vice versa. The vital line-break at “build / In” suggests, as Walford Davies has also noted, that “it is I they build” and “I [that] they build / In” (“R. S. Thomas: ‘The Poem’s Harsher Conditions’” 24). The divisions between self and nature are blurred by the interweaving martins. Similarly, the emphasis that falls on “their” makes the poem primarily about the house martins’ formative presence within the speaker’s being. Walford Davies affirms the sincerity of the poet’s statement: “The martins are not a symbol for something else: the poet was too serious a birdwatcher for that” (“The Site Inviolate” 16). Thomas feels fully at one with – at home in – nature. It is not for poetic effect that the birds are house martins. The nest-building martins occur in tandem with the speaker’s own creative production. Indeed, in Thomas’s “Bird Book” – a brown, nondescript notebook, held in the archives at Bangor University, that contains over fifty years’ worth of birding notes – house martins are recorded in Aberdaron on April 20, 1968, the same year that “The Place” was published.10 Their nesting in the eaves of the vicarage perhaps provoked the poem’s concern with homes and places, sites and dwelling.

The poet-birdwatcher makes a commitment to the martins’ self-revealing. He chooses not to represent them but to simply stand in the site – to be that site and undefined “place” of which Bate speaks – open to their

10 This thesis refers to Thomas’s birdwatching journal as his “Bird Book.” Details are provided in the “Works Cited.”
being as well as the ground of being. The speaker’s “method,” which is ironically counterpointed with that of the “man vowed / To science,” resists instrumentalizing the birds and overlooking their “thing-power,” to use Bennett’s term for the ability of things (natural or otherwise) to “manifest . . . independence” or autonomy (6). The quantifying, objectifying, and ordering of nature according to human meaning has a divisive, mechanistic legacy, as Christopher Manes has explained. The speaker therefore avoids a scientific dedication to facts that would enframe and reduce the martins to manipulable data. This would be to stand on the outside observing, through which the martins would lack the agency to be vibrantly “about myself.” The birds stand for themselves, which is vital to the speaker’s understanding of his composition: they “build / In” him.

The poem sets up a contrast between the birdwatcher-poet and man of science. Significantly, this applied science is subtly implicated in “business” while the birdwatcher’s concern, occupation, and objective is simply to watch, which he performs with a humble, Wordsworthian “wise passiveness” (MW 129). “[B]usiness,” like “method,” signals a difference in the birdwatcher’s non-enframing and non-exploitative approach to nature, especially given the commercial pun on “returns” which Davies points out (“The Poem’s Harsher Conditions” 25). Davies notes that the line “Through the hours of this brief” emphasizes how “‘Watching them fly / Is my business’ – my ‘brief’” (24). It is as though this is the poet-birdwatcher’s particular responsibility or even calling – the cause to which he has dedicated (“vowed”) himself. The birdwatcher also rejects restless reaching after fact and reason, allowing him that “more final truth” of which we spoke earlier. Birdwatching is the business of dwelling.
The birdwatcher dwells – as the intimate image of martins surrounding and nesting in him evokes – because his “method” does not systematically interrogate nature with a mind bent on a certain outcome. Indeed, to apply a method is to set up an inquiry over which one presumes to have control, an inquiry dictated by human terms. A method implies a presupposed distance between subject and object, rather than the communion described by the birdwatcher-poet. The birdwatcher chooses what Kate Soper, discussing Heidegger’s concept of dwelling, describes as “a kind of presuppositionless awe over the sheer fact of existence” (47). The speaker does not bring any “metaphysical assumptions” to the situation that are pre-emptive to a state of being; he tries to avoid a position which presupposes that one has already “stood back from a primary and pre-cognitive familiarity and imbrication” (Soper 48) with nature. The birdwatcher discovers his unity with nature by relinquishing objective control over it.

This is not merely an example of what Val Plumwood refers to as the “reverse centrism” of intuition or “nature over reason” (8). Thomas does not simply turn away from human reason but critiques how those methods can forget to have nature “about” oneself. The poem appeals to the knowledge of our essential unity with nature by choosing not to stand in a site as though we stand outside of it. The birdwatcher – someone who might often be in such a position, distantly observing – immerses himself.

Thus, through the poiesis of birdwatching the watcher dwells, reflecting that:

it is I they build

In and bring up their young

To return to after the bitter
Migrations, knowing the site

Inviolate through its outward changes.

The result of his still, peaceful acceptance of the givenness of the martins, is that he becomes “the site.” The martins nest in the vicarage and nest, continually, in him. Realizing their agency within and upon the self leads the speaker to understand his composition and being-in-the-world.

But what is the “site / Inviolate”? As Davies suggests, “Inviolate” means “not yet violated” and “not necessarily inviolable” (“The Poem’s Harsher Conditions” 24). Therefore, Davies reads these last lines as a comment on the poet’s “gracefully growing old” within the poem’s “ultimate theme” of “the passing of the seasons.” The birdwatcher’s connection with the martins – with nature – remains constant through his “outward changes.” Those “changes” are even what assure the birdwatcher (and martins) of his natural unity: “The site is recognized as unviolated ‘through’ (underneath) its outward changes, but also ‘through’ (because of) its outward changes.”

However, Thomas seems to talk about more than material form and natural process. The timeless, eternal rhythms of migration, and implications of death and rebirth in “bitter / Migrations” and the martins’ returning “young,” provide images of a deeper continuity. The “brief / Season” refers to the brief summer of the martins’ return and the birdwatcher’s “brief” time upon this earth. His “Inviolate” union intimates an abiding connection, a deeper kind of unity.

The interaction of nature and birdwatcher results in a revelation of the birdwatcher’s home in the encompassing ground and unity of being, the eco-spiritual order beyond place, self, and time – hence the vagueness of the title. Significantly, Thomas’s poem “A Thicket in Lleyn” (CP 511), explored in
Chapter Three, also envisions the divine ground of being – the eternity-that-is-nature – in a fountain of birds, or more specifically “spray from the fountain / of the imagination,” just as the martins are described as “Proust’s fountain / Of small birds.” This suggests a deeper gracefulness behind the birdwatcher’s contentment in the “site / Inviolate.” Thomas refers, seemingly, to the imaginary Hubert Robert fountain in the fourth volume of Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, suggesting that his image is one of eternity and unbroken being. In the essay “Two Chapels” Thomas also speaks of a timeless vision in which:

I realised there was really no such thing as time, no beginning and no end but that everything is a fountain welling up endlessly from immortal God. There was certainly something in the place that gave me this feeling. (*Prose* 44)

This is where the birdwatcher’s contentment lies, despite the “brief / Season” of fullness or life. Within the encompassing natural and eternal order – which migration often represents for Thomas – the human is never fully broken with the martins and the unity of being. Despite the martins’ anticipated absence, the speaker is never abandoned or his connection with nature violated. The inward, essential, and indeterminate “site” to which the martins return and “Build / In” remains whole. The birdwatcher is the ambient “site” and “place” that is importantly undefined and in which the birdwatcher stands, in Jonathan Bate’s words, “open to its Being.” The ambiguity of the “place” preserves the “site” from limitation or enframing. It is a “place” that can be anywhere and everywhere: the ground of being.

This understanding enables the birdwatcher to just watch and be, resisting how the world of the Machine alienates and separates man from
nature and the eternal unity of being. “Summer is here,” Thomas affirms, when “Once more the house” – also the self, the site, the place – “has its / Spray of martins.” The birdwatcher and his unity with the eternal ground of being is “Inviolate.” The “site” is not the birdwatcher alone – for he is violable through his “outward changes”– but the site in which he also dwells, in which the martins “build / In.” Thus, the birdwatcher realizes his dwelling in the eternity-that-is-nature, the fountain of birds.
Chapter 2: Birdwatching and the Ground of Being

You must wear your eyes out

“Sea-watching” (CP 306)

In “The Place,” with which the previous chapter concluded, the timeless experience of one’s being-in-the-world is also an experience of what we might variously call ultimate reality, the ground of being, or God. Llŷn was the liminal “place” for such experiences: the house martins nested under the eaves of the vicarage at Aberdaron while the birdwatcher-poet scanned the “[g]rey waters” surrounding the peninsula for a vision of God – the “rare bird” in “Sea-watching” (CP 306).

“Sea-watching,” as Tony Brown notes, “puns across two aspects of R. S. Thomas’s life, as priest and as birdwatcher” (R. S. Thomas 88). The poem merges real-life experience with poetic conceit, depicting birdwatching as an eco-spiritual practice. Indeed, birdwatching is often presented as a kind of prayer or meditative exercise. The two pursuits of birdwatcher and priest come together in Thomas’s third-person autobiography as a search for communion with the ground of being:

spending an hour or two looking over the sea hoping to see a migratory bird, he came to see the similarity between this and praying. He had to watch patiently for a long time for fear of losing the rare bird, because he did not know when it would come by. It is exactly the same with the relationship between man and God that is known as prayer. Great patience is called
for, because no-one knows when God will choose to reveal Himself. (A 100)

Sam Perry explains that for Thomas “God” does not refer to a separate transcendent entity but rather to the theologian Paul Tillich’s idea that “God is not a projection ‘out there’, an Other beyond the skies of whose existence we have to convince ourselves, but the ground of our being” (“Hoping for the Reciprocal Touch” 192). In the poem “Temptation,” which Perry also mentions, God is

Not a being . . . but being,
that atmosphere which, when I kneel
down, I breathe like an oxygen
of the spirit. (CLP 351)

Thomas’s conception of the ground of being is part of what, as explored in the previous chapter, the Machine conceals. This is the material and immaterial foundation of one’s being in the world, Heidegger’s “Open” where mind and nature exist in uninterrupted union, and the unconcealed unity of all things. In Timothy Morton’s terms, the ground of being might be understood as the “mesh,” the “vast” interconnectedness of things in which “[n]othing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully ‘itself’” (The Ecological Thought 15).11 The ground of being might also be described as “ambience,” which for Morton “denotes a circumambient, or surrounding, world. . . . something material and physical, though somewhat intangible, as if space itself had a material aspect”

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11 It should be noted, however, that the Morton of The Ecological Thought and Ecology Without Nature would perhaps be uneasy about his proximity, here, to Heideggerian thought. Beyond his usefulness in shedding light on similar concepts, Morton’s approach to environmental ethics and poetics is generally critical of Heidegger’s ontology of dwelling. However, both writers recognize the importance of finding alternative ways to describe what the term “nature” often obscures.
Thus, the ground of being is composed of what Heidegger calls the “fourfold” (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 150), in turn described by Kate Rigby as the “matrix of our dwelling” (“Earth, World, Text” 432). As she explains, this comprises

earth, understood as the land itself with its particular topography, waterways, and biotic community; sky, including the alternation of night and day, the rhythm of the seasons, and the vagaries of the weather; divinities, those emissaries or traces that yet remain of an absent God; and, last but not least, mortals, fellow humans, those who, in Heidegger’s (questionable) view, alone know that they will die. (430)

Accordingly, for humans any experience of the ground of being is momentary, involving a suspension of self-consciousness and consciousness of time.

In his birdwatching journal and memoir A Year in Llŷn, Thomas describes an experience of dwelling in the ground of being:

I found a spot between the trees at Tŷ Mawr pool where I could stand and hear the wind roaring around me, together with the sound of the sea nearby. At moments such as these, every problem concerning the purpose of life, death and morality disappears, and man feels in touch with existence, pure and simple. For a moment he is one with creation, participating in the genius of life, as every creature in turn has done over millions of years. (A 122)

Thomas connects with ultimate reality in a moment in which the divided self becomes Wordsworth’s “living soul” that “with eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony” sees “into the life of things” (“Lines written a few miles above
Tintern Abbey,” *MW* 131). Thomas goes on to say that his “name for such a rare, but not alien, experience is nature-mysticism.” He explains that to have been momentarily at-one with the earth is to understand that one is simultaneously part of and apart from the rest of nature, thus the experience is not unnatural or “alien.”

The cultivation of such moments, and the realization of how our connectedness to the ground of being enables ecological awareness, is the focus of this chapter. As Jonathan Bate suggests, we “take on an insistent care” when we dwell, when we “stand in a site, open to its Being . . . [and] the site is then gathered into a whole” (*The Song of the Earth* 261). “To dwell in the fourfold,” Kate Rigby explains, “is to create and preserve things and places, which in themselves disclose the interweaving, or ‘gathering,’ of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals” (“Earth, World, Text” 430).

The poiesis of birdwatching is one route to dwelling, at times, in the ground of being. In his essay “A Thicket in Lleyn” (*Britain, A World by Itself* 92-101), Thomas describes an experience of this when a flock of goldcrests descended upon him as he was out roaming the peninsula. As the birds releaved the bare trees and thronged him, he was caught up in a “timeless moment” (96) in which his consciousness was suspended. Upon reflection he realized that he had experienced himself “as part of the infinite I AM” (96), the “continuous flow of creative energy,” in S. J. Perry’s words, that is the ground of being (*Chameleon Poet* 226). Moved by this, Thomas does not reveal the location of this “minute strand of the great web of being” because he is concerned to preserve the thicket for others “to have such experiences in” (101).
“my method is so”: The poethics of birdwatching

In Llŷn the tensions between the world of nature and the world of humankind allowed Thomas to fully contemplate the ground of being and its obscuring by the Machine. “I became aware out on the peninsula of the wide skies, the starry sky at night, and the ocean around me, and this naturally led me into more contemplation of the universe,” he explains in a radio broadcast (“Furrows into Silence” 11). He also acknowledges in his “Autobiographical Essay” that in Llŷn he “began to ponder more the being and nature of God and his relation to the late twentieth-century situation, which science and technology had created” (AE 16). As the peninsula was a “practice area for aircraft,” Thomas

became conscious of the advance in modern technology and I asked myself just what part the machine and applied science and technology had to play in man’s existence, and whether it had – was it a means of leading him nearer to God, or giving him greater insight into the being and nature of God. (“Furrows into Silence” 11)

He came to the conclusion “that these things had very little to say to man’s condition.” Moreover, the concealment of the natural world by modern technology, and thus the increasing disappearance of the countryside, was reducing opportunities for Divine revelation. Accordingly, the implications for the future of the earth, in the wake of the Chernobyl crisis, were concerning.

As discussed in Chapter One, modern technology and applied science conceal and delimit the natural world, reducing it to discrete material objects and in the process obscuring the interconnected mesh or Wordsworthian
“harmony” in which we have our being. As Kate Soper explains in her own treatment of Heidegger, “[t]o consider the world of Nature as ‘object’ is . . . [to] overlook[] or distort[] the more primordial level at which Nature is already simply ‘there’ for us and we ourselves ‘thrown’ into its midst” (48). This is the ground of our being, but for Thomas it is also the ground of being – the deeper interconnected unity of every thing in God, in which he sought to dwell. Thus, one could easily substitute “God” for “Nature” in Soper’s statement above to observe the related concerns of eco-philosopher and priest – the eco-spiritual implications of Thomas’s search for the Divine. Indeed, in delimiting nature the Machine delimited the presence of God in the material world, unravelling any sense of an underlying, sacred unity and obstructing the way to an eco-spiritual dwelling in the world. In stark contrast to poiesis, then, the way the Machine reveals the world allows one to sustain an anthropocentric and potentially destructive understanding of the world, rather than see how we are caught up in its mystery.

The peninsula, though, provided intimations of the eternal, honing Thomas’s conception of God as the ground of being amidst the earth’s desacralization and the effects thereof. Here, birdwatching became a crucial response to the forces of the Machine, a way to oppose the supposed absence of God and establish a deeper unity between all things. As Thomas records in *A Year in Llŷn*:

> it was through seeing the old comely things that I loved disappearing, or being disfigured by modern technology, that I turned increasingly to bird-watching. Away from the din and violence of the world, away from man’s apathy and cruelty even, it is lovely sometimes to spend an hour or two out on the rocks
of Braich y Pwll, watching the birds go by and comparing the
waiting for a migrant bird with the waiting for a vision of God.

(A 144)

In “Bird Watching” (CLP 265) Thomas describes the birdwatcher’s special
advantage as the

ability of the heart
to migrate, if only momentarily,
between the quotidian and the sublime.

The spiritual implications of this are explored at length in the next chapter,
but the importance here is the birdwatcher’s way of looking and being. In the
poem, birdwatchers are visionaries who choose, against the “enamel
platitudes” and trappings of culture, “to observe birds” as one might observe a
religious practice. For these devotees everything comes down to birds. In “a
world / that has appropriated flight / to itself,” reducing it to another,
hubristic acquisition and mastery of nature, the speaker prays that “people /
like us” who can meticulously “distinguish one warbler / from another” will
guard against the disenchantment of the world.

The poiesis of birdwatching encompasses a number of “poethics” – that
is, practices that enable poiesis – through which one may experience the
ground of being and dwell. These poethics, as in “Bird Watching,” reflect ways
of being in and bringing forth the unconcealed ground of being. In particular,
the poethics of birdwatching acknowledge and re-envision the self-presencing
(or self-concealing) of nature as a means of encountering the encompassing
ground of being. The birdwatcher sees, and attempts to see through, the
distanced ways in which we represent and try to make sense of the world,
negotiating his ideas of the thing for the self-disclosure of the thing-itself.
The birdwatcher-poet’s commitment to patience, silence, and wonder, for instance, “does not challenge by enframing” but receives and “lets things be in their obscure otherness in the very process of revealing them,” modelling the poiesis theorized by critics like Rigby (“Earth, World, Text” 430). As we will see, the birdwatcher seeks to resist the restless “analytic eye” (or “I”) which keeps one from “the centre” where, in innocence, one might otherwise “dance” and “play” (CP 56). Similarly, in poems like “The Bright Field” (CP 302) he “turn[s] / aside” from the time-bound and human to “an acceptance of the spiritual plenitude at hand,” in Christopher Morgan’s words (39). The silencing of the searching mind and the embracing of wonder constitute an acceptance of the self-revealing of nature – or the Divine – and our involvement in it, unable to objectively see or control it. Instead, the birdwatcher seeks moments of oneness in which the self becomes intertwined with the ground of being.

In “The Place” (CP 207) the birdwatcher’s “method” to “have [the martins] about myself” in an uninterrupted way, defined by its resistance to scientific methods of revealing (and concealing) them, means that he becomes one with them. He shares his being with the house martins as the inner and outer contours of the self are interwoven and gathered up into a whole “[i]nviolate” space. This is the self’s connection to the unifying ground of being. Thomas frames the emptying of the self as its filling: turning from the distanced eye allows the “I” to “fill with” the martins and understand itself as “built / In” by them. As “[i]nviolate” implies, the birdwatcher’s deep unity then persists “through” the martins’ “bitter / Migrations,” through their coming absence and the self’s lonely sense of disconnection. This understanding has important implications for the human experience of being
part of yet apart from the rest of nature; it awakens the speaker’s sense of his abiding unity with the earth.

Finally, in order to encounter and convey the ground of being, the birdwatcher embraces negativity. Contrary to Jonathan Bate’s faith in poetic language as something which respects “the ‘self-concealing,’ of entities” (The Song of the Earth 262), Kate Rigby points out that language, and so perhaps all forms of making, inevitably enframes and conceals (“Earth, World, Text” 435). Thus, when all ways of seeing the world from within the logos – that is, from within language – put one at a remove from it and the ground of being, Rigby suggests that the negation of representation, what she calls “negative ecopoiesis,” is required.

In this chapter “ecopoiesis” refers not to a certain “ecopoetics” – which is Rigby’s focus – but to poiesis as ultimately a “way of life. . . . a form of praxis: that of knowing how to dwell,” as Rigby’s discussion of Heidegger acknowledges (430). Indeed, to dwell in the fourfold means “attuning oneself in that which one thinks, does, and makes to that which is given with . . . a particular natural environment” (430). Accordingly, the birdwatcher-poet seeks not to represent or conceal nature but to respond with openness, acceptance, and even praise for its self-revealing or self-concealing. He seeks, paradoxically, to think, do, and make nothing. His receptivity enables a “negative capability” whereby his subject is not delimited but vast and unknowable. To briefly quote Jane Bennett – whose aim is to re-conceptualize the agency of the material world but with a much greater materialistic conception of unity – this negativity means seeing and intensifying the “felt presence” of that which “eludes capture by the concept” (14). This approach reminds us that
'objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder’ and thus . . . life will always exceed our knowledge and control. The ethical project par excellence . . . is to keep remembering this and to learn how to accept it. (Bennett 14)

As Rigby also notes,

some form of exile or at least defamiliarization is intrinsic to dwelling. We must first encounter . . . absence or obscurity before we can begin to attune ourselves to it in dwelling. (“Earth, World, Text” 432)

It is only when things appear in their “strangeness, as if encountered for the first time,” Rigby continues, that they might “cease to be mere equipment” and instead “be revealed as . . . the matrix of our dwelling.”

Communion with the ground of being

In “Affinity” (CP 8) the farmer’s birdwatching ritual of listening “Morning and evening” to “God’s choir / Scatter their praises” models a commitment to dwelling. It is an almost spiritual exercise; an acceptance of the “spiritual plenitude at hand” as he crosses the threshold of the churchlike “woods’ wide porch.”

The farmer’s reverent openness finds its counterpart in “The Moor” (CP 166) in which another speaker describes a bare moor as “like a church.” Both speakers embrace silence; they do not impose upon the scene but stand in the site “bare-headed” (“Affinity”) and “Breath held like a cap in the hand” (“The Moor”). In the latter poem, such openness to the natural world allows the
speaker to intuit the Divine and experience the simple richness and
communion with the ground of being that is also intimated in “Affinity”:

What God was there made himself felt,
Not listened to, in clean colours
That brought a moistening of the eye,
In movement of the wind over the grass.

There were no prayers said. But stillness
Of the heart’s passions – that was praise
Enough; and the mind’s cession
Of its kingdom. I walked on,
Simple and poor, while the air crumbled
And broke on me generously as bread.

Significantly, God reveals Himself, making Himself “felt” as something which
“eludes capture.” He is not a discrete entity but an underlying presence in the
landscape. In the movement of the wind the speaker seems to sense that
Romantic spirit or breath of the Divine which “rolls through all things,” in
Wordsworth’s words (MW 131), and which “inspires” the speaker. Similarly,
the wind, as M. H. Abrams has observed in Romantic poetry, signifies a
“change in the poet’s mind” (113) which is reflected in the next stanza where
the speaker practises and enjoys an enlightened acceptance of and simple
communion with the self-disclosing of ultimate reality. His “praise” is silence
and stillness, rather than a pronouncement of “what God was there” or the
nature of the praiseworthy experience. Like the farmer in “Affinity,” the
speaker accepts rather than interjects. Furthermore, his “mind’s cession / Of
its kingdom” is the surrendering of the self for oneness, the relinquishing of
the speaker’s intellectual sovereignty to dwell in the ground of being, God’s kingdom on Earth. As the Eucharistic image suggests, this communion hallows the material world, transubstantiating or returning it to spiritual significance. The world is sacramental, an embodiment of the source of all life. Ultimately, the “clean” bareness of the landscape, coupled with the silence and stillness of the self, enables a “complex subjective event,” in Abrams’s words, a deeper insight into the life of things.

Similarly, in “Affinity” the “somnambulist” farmer’s silence, stillness, and selflessness – which arises from the bare landscape and his life of material poverty which provides only his most “essential need” – afford a deeper richness attuned to the earth. By having nothing yet embracing the vibrancy of the world in the birds’ praise, the farmer has “the world for church”; all of nature offers him communion with the Divine. Accordingly, the farmer’s lack of anything that, by the standards of his cultured onlookers in the poem, might conventionally “enrich his spirit or the way he lives,” is turned back upon his observers, who must instead realize that their “essential need / Is less than his” (emphasis added). Of course, one cannot have less than nothing, but because the farmer has “the world for church” any other so-called needs can hardly be “more” essential. Moreover, those needs are lesser because the farmer’s “essential need” is that which fundamentally makes up the essence of his being. The implied audience cannot need less than nothing, nor more, when nothing is everything, the sacred ground of one’s being. Thomas’s paradoxical parable therefore enacts a shift from thinking in terms of “more” to “less” and a radical rethinking of what indeed constitutes more or less, what really is “your essential need.” This would seem to be – as he explores in a much later set of poems that explore the image of nature’s “cathedral” – the
“bunched soil” and “empty sky,” the “tall woods, / so church-like,” through which one may “concede a world” as one may cede the kingdom of the mind (CLP 24).

This is precisely what the farmer has done and, whether by choice or not, a new “standpoint” is established in which “education or caste or creed” are not “essential” to the farmer’s being or that of the implied audience. Rather, the farmer models a primal and spiritual kinship with the earth, dwelling in the “woods’ wide porch” and listening to “God’s choir” while his onlookers are confined by the “brainbox” and the “drawers / That rot in the heart’s dust.” Far from reflecting his difference from those invited to “[c]onsider” his example, the farmer’s affinity with the natural world then affirms his prototypical human being connected to the earth, inhabiting the ground of being:

He also is human, and the same small star,
That lights you homeward, has inflamed his mind
With the old hunger, born of his kind.

The farmer’s name “also is written in the Book of Life” (CP 8), which reinforces how his – and his onlookers’ – spiritual and material being is rooted in the natural world.

Although Thomas’s recurring Welsh farmer-figure, Iago Prytherch, is not a birdwatcher, in “Gone?” (CP 348) he further models the poetics of birdwatching. The changed Welsh landscape of pylons and wires has “Nothing to show” anymore of Prytherch’s “essential need” which “only / bare ground, black thorns and the sky’s / emptiness” could “fulfil.” Wales is a land of auditory and visual noise that stands in stark contrast to the bare, clean, and spiritually-resonant landscapes which Thomas values. The poet is cynical
about the kind of existence which can be achieved against all this technological feedback and tumult, forces which, in enframing and dominating the land, enclose the mind from the ground of one’s being.

The un-technological ideal is pictured in “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” (CP 470–475):

A nineteenth century
calm;
that is, a countryside
not fenced in
by cables and pylons,
but open to thought to blow in
from as near as may be
to the truth.

As the ventilated lines and imagery suggest, such an uninhibited landscape “airs out” the mind, allowing the intermingling of external and internal worlds. Thus, the mind realizes its unity with the “essential” ground of being. This is another Romantic image, such as Abrams explores, which evokes how “exquisitely” the “external world is fitted to the mind” (Wordsworth, MW 198). It is another example of nature’s music, as Thomas puts it in “The Minister,” “calling to the hushed / Music within” (CP 54).

This unity is what Thomas seeks and finds in the farmer’s poetics in “Gone?”. The speaker observes the “flogged acres / of ploughland” – the broken land where Prytherch, Thomas’s recurring farmer-figure, once worked in un-mechanized union with the earth. “[F]ast / tractors” and the enframing and enslaving of the earth have driven out the farmer and his way of dwelling in the land. The speaker imagines people that will look “over” the landscape
with a surveying, colonialist eye which regards the natural world as a resource to flog. The farmer, however, “looked out / on this land” (emphasis added) from a position of involvement and, as the pun at the line-break suggests, with the vigilant care of one who dwells.

In the contemporary context of the poem, Prytherch provides a point of contrast, an absence that may still exist precisely as an idea or ideal for which to strive – as the poem’s titular question-mark conveys with a trace of hope. The poem invites comparison with how Prytherch dwelt on the land, working with the plough. Limited by the technology of traditional agriculture, which allowed him to remain in contact with the givenness of the earth – unlike Cynddylan who, on his tractor, breaks, enframes, and imposes upon it – the farmer is personally dependent on its provision and attuned to its essential being. “Gone?” turns upon consideration of how Wales (and nature) has been “flogged” – that is, exploited and sold-off by an altered perception of the earth as resource and slave: the hills are now “financed.”

But the farmer, implicitly, did not approach the landscape with homocentric notions of development or progress; neither did he embrace the Machine’s power and efficiency that converts nature to resource. Prytherch does not commoditize the land either materially or aesthetically. Rather, with the land not concealed or backgrounded by the Machine, Prytherch looked out

on this land and found no beauty
in it, but accepted it, as a man
will who has needs in him that only
bare ground, black thorns and the sky’s
emptiness can fulfil[.]
Prytherch exemplifies dwelling as an acceptance of the unconcealed ground of being. He sees the bareness, emptiness, and absence that is, in Annie Dillard’s punning sense, “all there is” (34). He sees the emptiness—that-is-fullness of the Open. The poem speaks to the kind of dwelling that goes beyond money to the “essential need” seen in “Affinity.” The farmer dwells in the ground of being.

Similarly, in “A Labourer” (CP 2) the farmer’s ageless attentiveness to the earth as the source and ground of his being – “the sweet pregnancy that yields his bread” – is also free of any sentimentally-distanced abstractions. “Is there love there, or hope, or any thought / For the frail form broken beneath his tread [?],” the speaker asks, which reminds us of how Prytherch “found no beauty / . . . but accepted it.” For the unnamed labourer nothing else interrupts his extreme closeness to the earth (as problematic as that can sometimes be, for Thomas); it is literally “all there is” for him as “Hour by hour” he “stoops to pull / The reluctant swedes.” As the Eucharistic image of the broken “bread” suggests, this is a spiritual communion with the sustaining ground of his being.

In a handwritten draft for an untitled and unpublished poem which I shall refer to by its first line, “It was the sort of conversation,” R. S. Thomas describes another moment of dwelling.12 As Tony Brown notes, “what is evoked is one of those rare moments of harmony and spiritual calm” (“Update”). The ground of being – or ultimate reality – discloses itself to the speaker when it is not challenged or enframed but allowed, to use Heidegger’s phrase, its “own presencing” (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 150).

12 See “Appendix 1.”
In an animistic vision of this, the speaker opens with an ethereal place
where nature is deep in “conversation” with itself. The metaphor suggests a
convergence of voices in dialogue. In a state of material and spiritual
communion, the leaves of the trees are “clasped as in a green prayer.” Birds
sing “fragrantly among / the branches,” contributing to the sensory liminality
and hallowed atmosphere. In this heady, heightened world, with the birds’
synesthetic incense and the flowers’ “bird / voices,” everything is
interconnected.

For the poet and his companion – perhaps his wife, given what may be
an unfolding conceit that explores deeper communion as a kind of marriage –:

It was the sort of conversation
we were present at and listened to
but could make nothing
at all of.¹³

This does not bother the speaker. He is content to be “present” and attentive;
not determined to make something of the “conversation.” The speaker
considers that the experience “was like a reception / in our honour,” but the
couple pauses, uncertainly, “on the threshold” of a deeper understanding or
communion, “unable or unwilling to believe / we were invited.”

However, it becomes clear that they need not stand back from this
“reception.” Rather, they can share in it; they can enjoy it and dwell without
needing to make anything of it from a position of pre-supposed distance and
difference. The line-breaks track this realization (“we were invited. It became

¹³ The striking-out of “at all” occurs in Thomas’s handwritten manuscript.
clear”) and the clarity with which they discern “God” (the name is not used) in nature:

It became clear
the whole sky was a face
tenderly inclined, thoughtful with cirrus[.]

In this state of being, the speaker understands that “We could play like children” in a mature innocence that holds huge questions but turns aside from them. The couple choose not to stand back from a primary, pre-rational conversance with that which encompasses them. Thus, in the “dawn / of an understanding” they comprehend

that here

was a presence that was neither human

nor inhuman but beyond both14

“God” is revealed not as an independent entity from which the speaker is separate, but as the ground of being. The pair register a “presence” that is “beyond” their understanding, and thus fully experience its undelimited presence. As Barry Sloan explains about Thomas’s discipline of watching and waiting, it is when we yield up “words, feelings and intellectual activity . . . that [we] may have the strongest awareness of the numinous” (38).

The speaker’s revelation occurs because his poethics allow that “presence” to disclose itself, like the enlivened, deeply-interconnected world through which it comes forth. The two humans do not speak or impose upon the scene but listen and enjoy it, open to nature’s unfolding invitation. Though

14 The following line ("in its ability to gaze on us eyes closed") is the final line but the poem seems to be unfinished. It is possible that the second page is missing, or that Thomas had given up on the draft at this point. Regarding this last line, though, the manuscript is not clear so the line could also read “in its ability to gaze on as eyes closed,” which especially suggests the poem is unfinished. There is also no punctuation to end the line. See “Appendix 1.”
they can “make nothing / of” this conversation one is, nevertheless, in process; other voices do speak and disclose their “own presencing.”

The speaker’s openness to a state of authentic being reflects the poet-birdwatcher’s awareness of something that exceeds understanding. This allows him to see through to the ground of being, the interconnectedness of which is evoked by the synaesthetic imagery of birds singing “fragrantly” and flowers with “bird / voices.” To see how things resist our understanding is to recover a sense of the more-than-human world. The birdwatcher encounters mysterious and defamiliarizing experiences through which the world is enlarged and destabilized. He is not sure, but his uncertainties provide a vaster sense and intuition of the presence of God, the ground of being.

The inability to “make” something of the conversation is also key to the speaker’s dwelling. The speaker suggests that he “could make nothing / of” – that is, could not understand – the conversation, but also that out of the conversation he “could make nothing.” This suggests the potential of negativity: he is able to make – in the sense of poiesis as a bringing-forth which does not conceal – without making, and thus able to make “nothing,” to have the Open revealed to him. The alteration to the initial wording (“could make nothing / at all of”) seems partly intended to make the double meaning of the line-break clearer. The affirmative power of “could” is also not undercut, in a discouraging manner, by “at all.” “[O]f” begins the new line, creating the ontologically-interesting enjambment: “make nothing / [out] of.”

Thus, by not concealing or enframing the “conversation” in language, the speaker allows it – nature, God, being – to disclose itself and receive him. The speaker allows for the unconcealed being-there of this natural unfolding. The speaker’s negation of ability – a negative capability, we might say –
culminates in an understanding of the “presence” that is “beyond” the binary of human/nonhuman.

**Birdwatching and Wonder**

“Both Plato and Aristotle said that philosophy begins in wonder,” notes Jonathan Bate (255). However, “[t]he history of technology is a history of the loss of that wonder, a history of disenchantment” (256). In particular, Thomas criticizes technology as the application of a philosophy which, rather than beginning in wonder, begins with the human mind. The Enlightenment exaltation of the mind and its control over reality made the external world separate, knowable, and exploitable. In light of this, it is significant that birdwatching “begins in wonder,” in *wondering* rather than supposedly *knowing*.

In “Swifts” (*CP* 154) Thomas establishes birdwatching as an alternative mode of being.

The swifts winnow the air.

It is pleasant at the end of the day

To watch them. I have shut the mind

On fools. The ’phone’s frenzy

Is over. There is only the swifts’

Restlessness in the sky

And their shrill squealing.

As the line-break suggests, to watch the swifts is to “shut the mind” in order to *open* it; to “shut the mind / On fools” and the technological noise with which they are alliteratively linked. The birdwatcher shuts the mind *in order to*
“watch,” so that birdwatching fulfils a deeper attentiveness to the earth rather than world, in the Heideggerian sense. As in “The Place,” “[t]o watch” – rather than to “look” or “observe,” which imply a preconceived object and purpose – signifies a “wise passiveness,” an almost religious devotion to simply accepting the self-unfolding of reality, as we will also see in “Sea-watching.” Thus, everything comes down to the swifts – there is only the swifts – in an almost elemental way; the world has been winnowed like the swifts have winnowed the air. The “frenzy” of the world is replaced by the birds’ “[r]estlessness” and “squealing,” an image of endless motion that raises ontological problems – including that of the speaker’s being within the encompassing, predatory order that the swifts’ “winnow[ing]” of the air subtly intimates.

However, as in “The Place” and other poems, the birdwatcher is committed to “learning” nothing – pun intended. As the swifts “glide” and “rip the silk of the wind” in an almost interdimensional way, “Unseen ribbons / . . . trailing upon the air,” they “pose” a “problem.” This is never articulated but it is a problem with “millions of years / Behind it,” seemingly going back to the “first thinker” – God, perhaps, or more likely the first philosopher – and the fabric of existence and the ground of being. As the swifts “meet / In the high air,” colliding like particles, the watcher wonders “what is engendered / At contact?” What occurs? What is brought forth? But against the implicit metaphysical questions, and the way the swifts seem to image some form of coming into being, the watcher brings the mind to rest:

I am learning to bring

Only my wonder to the contemplation

Of the geometry of their dark wings.
The speaker suggests that there is an underlying, mathematical design and order to the universe. But rather than trying to discover the equation he declares that “There is no solving the problem” the swifts “pose” – that is, it cannot be solved and is not to be solved. The watcher has only shut the world out of the mind, opening it instead to “wonder.” He dwells upon the earth because, like the Ancients, the philosophy behind birdwatching begins from a position of unknowing and thus being. His wonder means that he does not turn to the swifts as one who, from a position of knowledge, has “already . . . stood back from a primary and pre-cognitive familiarity and imbrication” with the natural world, to apply a phrase from Kate Soper (48).

The birdwatcher is content to be, demonstrating the “presuppositionless awe over the sheer fact of existence” which Soper describes as a commitment to “being” rather than engaging in “metaphysical assumptions” (47). This means that the watcher can be immersed in a moment in which there is only the swifts. As D. Z. Phillips writes, the speaker “goes beyond seeing [the swifts’] movements under the aspect of a problem to be solved” (Poet of the Hidden God 59, emphasis added). “Wonders are not explanations” and, in this case, “the wonders are to be fed on, not explained” as the self-presencing of the natural world. Wonder, as Bate says, “is a response to a momentary presence . . . the natural unfolding of things” (256).

The birdwatcher, therefore, does not conceal the swifts but experiences their mysterious being, the inscrutable “geometry of their dark wings.” His wonder is a form of silent praise, as in “The Moor.” Through the “mind’s cession / Of its kingdom” he is able to dwell in the undelimited.

But while it is “pleasant” to watch them, encountering the earth is necessarily defamiliarizing: after all, the speaker is still “learning to bring” a
receptive, rather than irritably rational, mind to such experiences. The swifts reorientate the speaker to the unconcealed peace of the ground of his being, retuning his mind to the natural world. They seem to rend reality with their “shrill squealing” and scythe-like, mysterious “dark wings” that “winnow” and “rip” the air. In her poem, “Swifts,” Anne Stevenson similarly describes “the cut air falling in shrieks on our chimneys and roofs” (Selected Poems 110). For Ted Hughes, swifts suddenly “Materialise at the tip of a long scream” (“Swifts,” Collected Poems 315) or are like meteorites “puncturing the veils of the worlds” (“The Swift comes the swift,” Collected Poems 446). This disruption and discomfort, and learning to accept it – as we will see especially in Chapters Four and Five – are important parts of coming to dwell in the big mystery of our being.

**Birdwatching and Prayer**

In “A bird’s prayer” (UP 175) Thomas contrasts the ways that men and birds pray – that is, how they approach ultimate reality. In its most mature form, such prayer models dwelling – that “authentic form of being,” in Jonathan Bate’s words, when we “stand in a site, open to its Being” and it is “then gathered into a whole” (261). It is to “set something free into its own presencing,” to “let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness” (Heidegger, “Building” 150, 160). As W. V. Davis explains, prayer is for Thomas the attempt to “stop and listen . . . even if we receive no answers, even if we hear nothing save the silence echoing in an empty edifice or in our own minds” (Poetry and Theology 48). Prayer most closely approaches
dwelling when answers and responses are not its goal, but rather silent openness.

In the poem the bird dwells because its “prayer” is attuned to the wholeness of being. “A bird’s prayer is its song,” writes Thomas, sung in a “feathered vernacular” that is free of high language, artifice, or self-consciousness. This is also true because its song is “addressed to nobody / but the unknown listener.” The bird prays without positing – and therefore imposing upon – a particular listener. Because the bird sings to “nobody,” its song is addressed to the open and unknown. But in addressing its song “to nobody” the bird also sings to a presence invoked in its absence or unknowability: “nobody / but the unknown listener.” In other words, the bird dwells; its “unknown listener” is “nobody” or no-thing, and thus anything or everything. Prayer is “the annihilation of difference,” Davis notes (28), and the bird’s indiscriminate singing reflects its unity with the whole.

Thus we arrive at a theological statement: the poem is not just about a bird singing to all but the nature of the all-encompassing ground of being. Thomas’s enjambment reflects a balance of negation and affirmation, of absence-as-presence or, in Walford Davies’s words, “the Absence which fills our lives” (“The Poem’s Harsher Conditions” 23). The object, as it were, of the bird’s prayer is described in negatives because there is no object “but” the ground of being. Like the line-break “Nothing / but” in “Sea-watching,” Thomas evokes a presence-in-absence or absence-as-presence that is addressed in the bird’s prayer.
The bird therefore poetically “sings up” the “dwelling place,” to use Kate Rigby’s borrowed phrase (“Earth, World, Text” 432). Its prayer is present in, and responds to, the “simple oneness” of the ground of its being without restless inquiry or appeal. We will recall Prytherch’s similar acceptance of the self-presencing being of the world, his unbroken dwelling in the everything-that-is-nothing where the “sky’s / emptiness can fulfil” his authentic being (CP 348).

As in “The Moor” or “Affinity,” the bird’s song is a form of praise rather than inquiry. This, as Rigby notes, citing Jean-Louis Chretien, is “the highest possibility of speech” (439). Conversely,

Man’s prayer is a trickle
of language gathering to a reservoir
to be drawn on by the thirsting
mind in its need for meaning.

While “thirsting / mind” conveys a fundamental need as much as a desire to process and control human experience, man’s prayer nevertheless differs in its approach to the “unknown listener.” The bird’s prayer is given to the world but man pools his for endless material upon which to reflect. Man’s prayer (and language) is utilitarian, not a quiet acceptance or gratitude. It is tentatively and thinly given (“trickle”) to momentarily satisfy but also accumulate a fathomless supply of words and meanings that can never quite satisfy his search for truth.

“A bird’s prayer” does not overtly criticize man’s prayer but the contrast it establishes comments on the way that man, seemingly by nature, orientates

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15 As Rigby notes, her phrase is borrowed from Australian aboriginal cultures.
himself to the “unknown listener.” Dwelling is difficult for us, the poem suggests, posing the question: what is prayer, and how can our prayer be more than a means to an end? Prayer itself is under scrutiny here, not its effectiveness at communing with or making sense of ultimate reality. There is no apparent addressee for man’s prayer, so that the poem also explores man’s conception of prayer as a resource, a means to an end. The “thirsting” search for meaning, rather than simple openness, seems problematic. For the bird, however, prayer is principally a means of authentic being.

Birds and birdwatching therefore reframe prayer as a kind of consciousness and poiesis through which one may commune with the ground of being. Indeed, for Thomas “contemplating nature,” as William McGill suggests, “becomes a form of prayer, a means of dealing with matters of faith and doubt” (150) over the presence of God. Birdwatching, as we will also explore in Chapter Three, helped Thomas “understand” the full being of God as the encompassing ground of being.

In particular, birdwatching enabled Thomas to re-envision the absence of God as His presence. By embracing God’s otherness to human definitions and delimitations, Thomas was able to “see” through to the vast, unconcealed ground of being, rather than see only God’s absence in the modern world. This is most apparent in the poem “Sea-watching” (CP 306) in which, as Barry Sloan says, “the poet’s long years of residence on the Welsh coast and his dedication to ornithology merge with and become metaphors for his religious quest” (39). In the poem, Thomas gains “a new level of insight which is no longer dependent on [an] actual sighting of the ‘rare bird’ to validate belief in its ‘presence’” (40).
In “Sea-watching” the practice of birdwatching is presented as a means of prayer, that is, communion with the ground of being. The poem depicts a birdwatcher searching a vast expanse of open water for a “rare bird” which, it becomes apparent, is an image for the Divine. The “bird’s” absence comes to signify a deeper, fuller “presence” beyond place and time, the acceptance of which is modelled by the poem. Thus the practice of openness to a “vast,” undelimited presence is more meaningful than any isolated sighting of one mere bird. The sense of a hidden, absent, and unknowable God poietically brings forth God’s undelimited presence as the ground of being.

The birdwatcher explains that “Daily / over a period of years” he has “let the eye rest” on these neutral “Grey waters, vast / as an area of prayer.” This suggests an acceptance – a kind of “amen” or “let it be” – whereby the birdwatcher’s eye rests with the same openness depicted in “The Place.” However, this is not simply an unthinking behaviour but a conscious commitment to do (and make) nothing. The birdwatcher allows his restless eye to be still, to calmly and openly dwell upon the empty, neutral waters. In another sense, the birdwatcher also lets the “I” rest in order to commune with the Open – “all that is undelimited,” by Kate Rigby’s definition (“Earth, World, Text” 431). He suspends the tyranny of the eye/I in order to dwell.

The speaker then reflects:

Was I waiting for something?

Nothing

but that continuous waving

16 Cf. A Year in Llŷn, in which Thomas recalls turning aside from the “din and violence” of the postmodern world to scan the sea in hope of “a vision of God” (A 144).
that is without meaning
occurred.

At first these lines – reminiscent of Matthew Arnold’s sense of meaninglessness in “Dover Beach” – convey the speaker’s initial disappointment upon the path to seeing absence as presence and dwelling in the ground of being. However, ambiguities in these lines evoke the poiesis of birdwatching in action, and thus a more positive perspective, as it were, which is yet to be made clear. Ambiguity enables the poem to play-out the revelation of absence-as-presence so that the reader learns the path toward dwelling, while the poem itself models the poiesis of birdwatching. The poem does not merely reach a state of contentedness at the end, it also starts from a position of dwelling, unfolding from the poet-birdwatcher’s attunement to the ground of being.

“Nothing” may be the most important word in the poem: it is set aside in its own line (which enacts the space of nothing), capitalized like a proper noun, connected to the preceding question while beginning the next sentence, and linked visually to “occurred,” the only other single-word line. Thus, the birdwatcher’s question is followed by an ambiguous answer: no, he was not waiting for something, or perhaps he was not waiting for some thing in particular but open to the givenness of the world. In a sense, then, the birdwatcher was waiting for “Nothing” (capital “N”), which seems likely given the poem’s final acceptance of absence. Here the fact that the poem’s title, despite its subject, is not “bird-watching” is particularly significant. The title does not suggest wry dissatisfaction (that there is nothing to see here) but signifies that nothingness upon which the birdwatcher focuses. If the speaker
was unequivocally disappointed then the poem would perhaps be called “Bird-
watching.”

“Nothing” paradoxically “occur[s,]” as the line-break intimates, in the uninter-
rupted form of the neutral sea, which hints at the idea of absence as presence. Accordingly, the poem suggests that the birdwatcher waits upon nothing other than “that continuous waving / that is without meaning.” The title is again significant: the birdwatcher transcends the search for some separate thing to inhabit instead the nothing-that-is-everything, the ground of being; he lets the searching eye/I “rest” upon the sea that is “without meaning” and “vast / as an area of prayer.” The continuous presence of meaninglessness, and what he later describes as the sea’s “beautiful . . . emptiness” (my emphasis), is precisely what he has learned to embrace. “Nothing” (capital “N”) “occur[s],” emptiness is fullness, and thus as we will see, the bird’s “absence / [is] as its presence.”

The speaker then displays his acceptance of seeing nothing, his commitment to an open and vigilant kind of prayer:

Ah, but a rare bird is rare. It is when one is not looking,

at times one is not there

that it comes.

You must wear your eyes out,

as others their knees.

His ruminative admission – “Ah” – suggests that seeing nothing is not problematic or discouraging but is intrinsic to the nature of the search. His “waiting” may serve no purpose other than waiting but waiting openly is, in the end, what matters.
The birdwatcher accepts seeing nothing because he understands the hidden as hidden, something that can only be known in its absence and unknowability or seen when “one is not looking.” As the line-break emphasises, “a rare bird is” by its very nature “rare” – that is, hard to find, not well-known, but also subtle or rarefied. A deeper experience of the “bird’s” presence (that is, God’s) comes from not seeing it, not separating it from or defining it against the no-thing that is everything. Thus, despite the apparent catch-22 in the lines above, the birdwatcher’s tone is optimistic and knowing rather than cynical. After all, literally seeing a rare bird cannot be his object, given his directive to “wear your eyes out” despite the futility. What is important is the openness to a deeper seeing, as suggested by the imagery of prayer and vigil, and the alternate meaning of wearing “your eyes out.” One must not only turn one’s eyes outward beyond the self, but wear the “I” out, efface the self so that one may fulfil the requirement of “not looking” and being “not there,” after which the figurative bird “comes” – or, like the empty sea, “occur[s].” This reflects the poethics of “turning aside to stillness and waiting . . . as preparation for the possible apprehension of the divine in nature” (Morgan 64).

A potentially defeatist statement therefore becomes a positive assertion that it is “when one is not looking, / at times one is not there” that the “rare bird” appears. This reflects the active passiveness – or Wordsworthian “wise passiveness” (MW 130) – of the poiesis of birdwatching. Like the opening, where the speaker lets his eye/I “rest,” Thomas suggests that “one” must not preconceive the object and purpose of one’s search, which would only determine absence and emptiness. Rather, one must engage in “not looking,” that paradoxical “conscious commitment” to suspending the eye/I.
As Thomas similarly suggests in “Tidal” (CLP 167), another Arnold-inspired poem, the prayerful “approach[]” to God requires constant openness and humility. Accordingly, this “assault” should not be violent only persistent, in acknowledgment that God cannot be exposed and known except through the “tidal” motions of prayer. This poietic mode of being encompasses the despairing experience of “Nothing,” and the faithful vision of “Nothing / but . . . that [which] is without meaning,” by which the nature and grace of God can be “known.” The speaker explains,

Dashing

my prayers at him will achieve

little other than the exposure

of the rock under his surface.

My returns must be made

on my knees. Let despair be known

as my ebb-tide; but let prayer

have its springs, too, brimming,

disarming him; discovering somewhere

among his fissures deposits of mercy

where trust may take root and grow.

As the line-break emphasizes, the speaker’s “returns” – his returns to the “assault” and his “proceeds” from it – must be actively “made” from a passive
position of humility ("on my knees"), through which an enlightened faith may
“take root.”

Thus “Sea-watching” suggests that, like the birdwatcher in “The Place,”
one must simply watch and “fill,” do and make nothing. To fully “wear your
eyes out,” then, is to relinquish the controlling “I” and, so doing, dwell in the
pregnant ground of being – the no-thing that is everything – from which the
self knows no division. Similarly, this unity also requires being “not there.”
The poem evokes a state of being in which one is not spatially or temporally
limited, for to be “there” is not to be immediately “here” in the Open. The
birdwatcher must be at-one with the world in such a way that he is “not there,”
not apart from but part of the ground of being. At another level, the poem
advocates turning one’s eyes outward – wearing them out into the world – so
that what was “there” becomes “here.” All in all, there is a suggestion of Ralph
Waldo Emerson’s eco-spiritual vision in this, and a unity we will explore in the
next chapter. Emerson writes,

Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe
air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism
vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all;
the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am
part or particle of God. (10)

The result, for Thomas’s birdwatcher, is described thus:

I became the hermit
of the rocks, habited with the wind
and the mist.

Having turned aside from the self and, it seems, a materialistic existence, the
birdwatcher comes to fully inhabit and blend with the world, dressed in the
elemental robes of an eco-spiritual order. The poem concludes with the deep fulfilment of his efforts:

There were days,
so beautiful the emptiness
it might have filled,
its absence
was as its presence; not to be told
any more, so single my mind
after its long fast,
my watching from praying.

In these final lines, the birdwatcher describes his at-oneness ("so single my mind") with the ground of being after his religious "fast" – his self-abstinence and single-mindedness. The birdwatcher encounters a deeper presence and communion through the rare bird’s absence. "An imaginative response," S. J. Perry notes, "and a mode of being which, in Keats’s terms, is negatively capable" emerges as the "sensory" emphases and limitations of the self are relinquished (Chameleon Poet 227). The birdwatcher’s commitment to waiting for and seeing the “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is,” in Wallace Stevens’s famous words (“The Snow Man,” Collected Poems 9–10), allows him to see the unconcealed and undelimited ground of being. In an abstruse, mystical way the literal “rare bird” may not be “present” but, in its deeper meaning as the hidden god and ground of being, neither is it “not there.” Its presence is felt, or rather intuited, like the “continuous waving” of the sea that is “Nothing” yet also the “Nothing” that “occur[s].”

The birdwatcher’s openness to the profound paradox of seeing nothing means that the bird’s absence is seen as an absence, as the “nothing that is
the absence that presupposes presence. By seeing what is “not there,”
the birdwatcher sees a negative image, as it were, of the rare bird. Its absence
becomes “as its presence”; a deeper, mystical, undelimited kind of presence
which is “not there” yet, in some other sense, is not “not there.” The bird
occurs as an absence, “it comes” to the mind that subtly sees “Nothing.”

As Thomas suggests in “Abercuawg,” absence and nothingness do not
exist, they are rather a deeper being:

one cannot conceive of . . . nothing. That is the mistake which
the brain always makes. People tend to think that the original
state is a void and that being is something which comes and fills
that void. We speak of presence and absence. But we can never
become conscious of absence as such, only that what we are
seeking is not present. Only being is real therefore. ‘Nothing’
cannot be conceived . . . There is always something present.

(Prose 163–4)

“Nothing,” then, is an abstraction; the absence of the rare bird, and the
“Nothing” which the sea reflects, is the presence of the ground of being. One
cannot conceive of absence itself, but only what is “not present.” Thus, the
poem evokes an undelimited presencing of that which eludes
conceptualization. When the birdwatcher sees absence and hiddenness, what
he sees as “not present” is the hidden and unknowable, the presence of the
great absence that is the ground of being, the everything which is “not to be
told [apart]” from anything nor “told / any more.”17 The poem suggests from
the start that nothing is Nothing, that nothing is not there. By this logic,

17 Cf. “Via Negativa,” “Adjustments”
Thomas evades Matthew Arnold’s sense of meaninglessness and emptiness. Similarly to Stevens’s Snow Man, the birdwatcher sees the nothingness and emptiness of the sea as well as the “nothing that is not [nothing].” As Thomas's earlier line-break suggests, “Nothing” occurs and “Nothing / but” the “vast” sea occurs – the endless and encompassing ground of being.

Thus, the poem models and explains the poethics of negativity and the poiesis of birdwatching. By embracing “Nothing,” and accepting the hidden as hidden, the birdwatcher “sees” through to the unconcealed ground of being. In the end, that which is “without meaning” is meaningful through its meaningfulness, its freedom from anthropocentric delimitation. This discloses the vastness of the ground of being and unlimited possibilities of presence and communion. To adapt another line from Thomas’s “Abercuawg” lecture, the absence of the rare bird is “a way to come to know better, through its absence, . . . [its] nature” (Prose 164, emphasis added). The absence of meaning is the paradoxical meaningfulness at which the birdwatcher arrives, which is how Thomas ends up at a different place from Matthew Arnold. The “emptiness” is “beautiful.” D. Z. Phillips, one of the best critics of Thomas’s Deus absconditus, explains that once the “hidden has been revealed . . . it is no longer hidden.” However, when we accept that “what is revealed is revealed as hidden” we come to another revelation via absence or negation, another way of coming “to know better” without delimiting (From Fantasy to Faith 206). God, that rare bird, is brought forth “as the sense which the givenness of [the world] has for [the believer]” or, in this case, the birdwatcher (207). The poem therefore demonstrates the poiesis of birdwatching as that which brings forth the unconcealed ground of being, that which actively – paradoxically – does and makes nothing.
“Sea-watching” is therefore a guide to practising the poethics of birdwatching as an eco-spiritual practice and commitment, rather than a poem about a specific journey toward poiesis and dwelling. “Sea-watching” does not reach a realization or turn to a certain way of being. Rather, it starts from a position of poietic acceptance. This is only apparent to readers after they can see, like the birdwatcher, that the sea appears to be “without meaning.” But, as William V. Davis says, this “is the meaning” (Poetry and Theology 14). The poem therefore allows readers – all the more powerfully – to work towards this realization and poiesis themselves, moving through potential Arnoldian misgivings to acceptance, openness, and finally an enlightened conception of the ground of being.

In the poem, the practices of prayer and birdwatching merge, yet birdwatching is not merely a metaphor for Thomas’s “religious quest.” Rather, birdwatching is an eremitic practice; a vigil or ritual through which Thomas experiences the ground of being. Birdwatching exemplifies Thomas’s conception of prayer as dwelling: a mode of being that is “neither routine” (like the restrictive and mundane “method” that is withstood in “The Place”) “liturgical, nor occasional,” in Barry Sloan’s words, but “a whole way of living and a disposition of mind” (43).
Chapter 3: The Unity of Being

To see heaven as a length of seashore
And months of birdwatching
Mark Jarman, “R. S. Thomas”

In his 1985 J. R. Jones memorial lecture, entitled “Unity,” R. S. Thomas explores the primary importance of “unity of being” (29). This is where the poiesis of birdwatching ultimately leads and it can be described as dwelling in what Heidegger calls the “simple oneness” of the “fourfold” (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 50). As Kate Rigby explains, this is “the matrix of our dwelling,” the undelimited “interweaving, or ‘gathering,’ of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals” (“Earth, World, Text” 432, 430).

An understanding of the essential unity between all things is vital, Thomas argues, in a world that is suffering the negative impact of human disunity with the earth. This disunity – driven by Western philosophical traditions which, following the advances of science, tend to believe there is a “difference” between “God” and “the Being of the universe,” and thus between “the religious view and the scientific view” (“Unity” 29) – opens the once-sacred ground of human being to violation. As Thomas explains, “[w]here people formerly believed in the unity of being” they gradually came to distinguish between the human mind and body, or between matter and spirit. . . . [as] completely separate from each other. . . . This led in time to a total reductionism, to belief that the whole world was nothing but a machine. (31)
In turn, the separation of human and nature along spiritual and material lines established an exploitative hierarchy. Nature became seen as “inarticulate material, without a voice, without a soul,” in Christopher Manes’s words (“A Natural History of Silence” 191). Thus, man came to look at the natural world “as something to be exploited by him” (“Unity” 33). Similarly, through the theory of evolution Life itself “became God,” establishing an existence that was no more than “hard, material particles” (31), governed by a “survival of the fittest” or “take what you can” mentality (32). Thus, man created a situation in which Earth’s resources are rapidly being depleted, in which the environment is being defiled, and in which man himself has the power to destroy all living things on Earth, including himself. (33)

This chapter looks at how Thomas explores the unity of being from his own religious standpoint and specific kind of nature spirituality. This is examined through Bron Taylor’s framework of “Dark Green Religion” which attempts to categorise diverse earth-centred religious perspectives in an age defined by environmental concern and the need to respond holistically to the sacredness of the earth. Here the poiesis of birdwatching is instrumental in achieving this awareness and entering what Thomas calls “a permanent state of alertness to the harmony of the universe” (“Unity” 32).

In particular, when the opposing worldviews of science and religion reinforce the absence of God and a deeper unity between all things, this chapter explores how Thomas’s conception of God as the ground of being brings science and religion together, “regrounding” religion in a resacralized earth. Kate Rigby’s term for the Romantic experience of the sacred whole refers to the ways in which the Romantic poets’ “reclamation of a place for the
sacred is at once a core element of their revaluation of the natural world” — in a word, their resacralization of the earth — and “interlinked” with what M. H. Abrams views as the Romantic “secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking” (“Romanticism and Ecocriticism” 71–72). In other words, “regrounding” conveys the way that Thomas’s religious outlook does not sidestep science because it is seen as antithetical to religious sensibility. Rather, it finds new ways for religion to present the unity of being in an increasingly secular world.

For Thomas, God is the mysterious “being who unite[s] everyone and everything in and through himself,” rather than “a being” who is separate from the earth (“Unity” 30). God is

at the centre of things, the unity in which everyone can see the reason for, and the meaning of, the life of the whole of creation and of their own little personal lives.

Thus, an essentially “religious” poetic awareness of the unity of being is needed in order to dwell responsibly on the earth.

But, in line with his dark green religion and regrounding of religion, Thomas suggests that the scientific and religious (according to his definition) worldviews are not so different. “By shifting the emphasis away from matter as something solid to something closer to a field of force,” he notes, contemporary physics has “come to realize just how mysterious the universe is, and that we need qualities such as imagination and intuition and a mystical attitude if we are to begin to discover its secrets” (“Unity” 33). Indeed, Thomas reflects that scientists “of the first rank [probably] exercise a wonder at creation which is akin to religion” (“Probings” 43). “[S]cientists of the past,” he explains, “fell prey to their own concepts, mistaking their symbols for
reality itself,” but “matter is not half as solid as the materialists would like to believe” (“Unity” 33). Rather, science has come to understand that matter is “so immaterial that it is more akin to spirit than conventional matter.” Similar to the poet’s or saint’s vision of the unity of being,

The physicist believes in a living web, which connects everything in the entire universe. All living things are related to each other, and no part of the universe can be harmed or abused without awakening echoes throughout the whole web. (“Unity” 33) Accordingly, what emerges “is a picture of the world as a living being of which we all form a part. That is the unity of being of which we must be aware, if we wish to survive” (34). “If we look at it in this way,” Thomas suggests,

it is easy to see the Earth as an extension of God himself, as a great organism in which everything co-operates for the good of the whole; the material, the psychological, the cultural, the social, and so on, as things which are linked together and which influence one another. In the face of that, how can anyone keep himself separate, or imagine that he is free to do as he wishes without causing vibrations throughout the whole organism? (38–39)

**Dark Green Religion**

Bron Taylor’s discussion of what he terms “dark green religion” offers a useful framework through which to discuss our Anglican priest’s unorthodox nature spirituality. Dark green religion encompasses diverse spiritually-meaningful ways of relating to the earth in this era of environmental crisis. As
noted earlier, Thomas’s search for God “led him away from more conventional approaches to . . . ‘ultimate reality’ and towards a view of God as the all-encompassing ‘ground of [. . .] being,’ a continuous flow of creative energy” (Perry, *Chameleon Poet* 206). Intrigued by Hindu and Buddhist thought, and taken with Paul Tillich’s idea that “God is not . . . a person or a being,” Thomas values a “more impersonal approach” towards “contact with an eternal . . . ultimate reality” (“R. S. Thomas at Seventy” 178), one which allows for God to be the inseparable source of all being. Indeed, Thomas observes that Eastern spirituality – in its freedom from Western rationalism – harmonizes with some aspects of contemporary physics (“Probings” 43).

Broadly speaking, dark green religion is “religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care” (Taylor ix). Dark green religion, Taylor explains, flows from a deep sense of belonging to and connectedness in nature, while perceiving the earth and its living systems to be sacred and interconnected. Dark green religion is generally deep ecological, biocentric, or ecocentric, considering all species to be intrinsically valuable, that is, valuable apart from their usefulness to human beings. This value system is generally (1) based on a felt kinship with the rest of life, often derived from a Darwinian understanding that all forms of life have evolved from a common ancestor and are therefore related; (2) accompanied by feelings of humility and a corresponding critique of human moral superiority, often inspired or reinforced by a science-based cosmology that reveals how tiny human beings are in the universe; and (3) reinforced by metaphysics of interconnection.
and the idea of interdependence (mutual influence and reciprocal dependence) found in the sciences, especially in ecology and physics. (13)

Dark green religion is not simply religion that is “green” (that is, “environmentally friendly”) but religion in which “nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care” (Taylor 10). The “dark” aspect refers to the controversial aspects of such religion, which can reach anti-human conclusions in its extreme “deep ecology” forms. “The well-being if not rights of individuals,” notes Taylor, “could be endangered by efforts to ensure the flourishing of some supposedly sacred whole” (12). In Thomas’s case, this manifests in his sometimes dark eco-nationalist agenda.

Dark green religion includes diverse kinds of nature religions which increasingly shape “the worldviews and practices of grassroots social activists and the world’s intelligentsia” (x). Dark green religion, Taylor claims, is “already important in environmental politics. It may even inspire the emergence of a global, civic, earth religion” (ix-x). When it is difficult to see the earth as more than matter – as more than the terms in which an increasingly secular world frames it – dark green religion perceives the greater mystery and unity of being.

Dark green religion demonstrates a religious awareness of unity in the wake of cynicism and dissatisfaction with traditional religion. Where those beliefs may have repressed earlier nature religions, dark green religion regrounds and reforms the idea of religion and its natural-world origins. Pertinently, given Thomas’s spiritual emphasis on unity, Taylor connects “the idea of religion to the Latin root leig, meaning ‘to bind’ or ‘tie fast,’ or religare, which could be rendered ‘to reconnect.” Thus Taylor suggests that “religion
has to do with that which connects and binds people to that which they most value, depend on, and consider sacred” (2). Intriguingly, as Chapters Four and Five discuss, Thomas often imagines God as a raptor, describing the religious experience as a violent, rapturous reconnection with the Divine. The Latin term is derived from rapere, which means “to seize.” Taylor’s eco-philosophical discussion of religion – which he notes “does not presume a belief in nonmaterial spiritual beings” (xiii) – reframes religious awareness as a valid practice and outlook in today’s world. Taylor’s “objective” is “to rattle assumptions as to what counts as religion in order to awaken new perceptions and insights” (3). “[T]he desire for a spiritually meaningful understanding of the cosmos, and the human place in it, has not withered away,” Taylor argues. “[I]ncreasingly, new perceptions, both explicitly and implicitly religious, have filled the cultural niches where traditional religious beliefs have come to be seen as less plausible” (x).

Indeed, Thomas opens up the scope of religion to encompass aspects of nature religions and nature spirituality. After all, he admits to being “tinged with Eastern ideas about religion” and “never” having “been very orthodox” (“Letter to Simon Barker” 295). Accordingly, Thomas seems to agree with Taylor that religion and spirituality are not so distinct and that “most contemporary spirituality can easily be considered religious” (Taylor 4).

Indeed, the kind of religious awareness that the Anglican poet explores is often spiritual – and poietic – rather than institutional. As he says of his editorial choices in The Penguin Book of Religious Verse: “sitting somewhat loosely to orthodoxy, I have attempted to broaden the meaning of the term ‘religious’ to accommodate twentieth-century sensibility” (PBRV 9). Thomas “[r]oughly” defines religion as “embracing an experience of ultimate reality”
and “the total response of the whole person to reality” (8–9). “[M]odern sensibility,” he writes,

might wish to include more under the title ‘religious’ than traditionalists could accept. . . . Are we not coming to accept that, wherever and whenever man broods upon himself and his destiny, he does it as a spiritual and selfconscious [sic] being. . .? (10).

Nevertheless, the commonly-perceived distinction between religion and spirituality sheds light on Thomas’s dark green religious awareness. Where “religion” often refers to “organized and institutional religious belief and practice,” spirituality “is held to involve one’s deepest moral values and most profound religious experiences” (Taylor 2). Furthermore,

Spirituality is often thought to be about personal growth and gaining a proper understanding of one’s place in the cosmos, and to be intertwined with environmentalist concern and action. This contrasts markedly with the world’s predominant religions, which are generally concerned with transcending this world or obtaining divine rescue from it. (Taylor 3)

This chapter refers to Thomas’s “nature spirituality” to invoke these implications. “Spirituality” is also “more often” associated with nature religions, among which Taylor would include Thomas’s self-proclaimed nature mysticism.

In light of Thomas’s religious “sensibility” and ways of relating to the natural world that have been informed by science, issues with conventional religion, and environmentalist urgency, dark green religion provides a useful framework for discussion. Thomas’s form of dark green religion aligns most
closely with what Taylor terms Gaian Spirituality. Taylor outlines four “types” of dark green spirituality, noting that the boundaries between them are fluid because these types “represent tendencies rather than uncomplicated, static, and rigid clusters of individuals and movements” (15). Gaian Spirituality, he explains, reflects the “spiritual or supernaturalistic” inverse of Gaian Naturalism. Both fall into the category of Gaian Earth Religion, which is “a shorthand way to suggest holistic and organicist worldviews” (13). The other category, “Animism,” which is comprised of “Spiritual Animism” and “Naturalistic Animism,” reflects “the perception that spiritual intelligences or lifeforces animate natural objects or living things” (15).

Thomas’s Gaian Spirituality underlies his “Unity” lecture and his “rough” definition of religion. “Gaian” reflects an understanding of the “biosphere (universe or cosmos) to be alive or conscious, or at least by metaphor and analogy to resemble organisms with their many interdependent parts” (Taylor 16). Gaian Earth Religion views the “energetic, interdependent, living system” as “the fundamental thing to understand and venerate” (16). In its spiritual form, Gaian Earth Religion perceives “the superorganism – whether the biosphere or the entire universe – to have consciousness, whether this is understood as an expression or part of God, Brahman, the Great Mystery, or whatever name one uses to symbolize a divine cosmos” (16). There is, in other words, an “immaterial dimension” which underlies “life-forms or natural forces” (15). Gaian Spirituality, Taylor also notes, can “draw on nonmainstream or nonconsensus science” for data that reinforces its generally pantheistic (or panentheistic) and holistic metaphysics” (16). Thomas’s organicist analogy for the unity of being, as well as his belief in “imagination
and intuition and a mystical attitude” (“Unity” 33) is consonant therefore with Gaian Spirituality.

However, as the similar views of contemporary physics suggest, neither is Thomas’s way of thinking far from Gaian Naturalism. Certainly, Gaian Naturalism is “skeptical of supernaturalistic metaphysics,” and “more likely to restrict its claims to the scientific mainstream as a basis for . . . [its] holistic metaphysics” (16), yet Taylor acknowledges that its proponents express awe and wonder when facing the complexity and mysteries of life and the universe, relying on religious language and metaphors of the sacred . . . when confessing their feelings of belonging and connection to the energy and life systems that they inhabit and study. (16)

This reflects the broad range of religious sensibility which dark green religion encompasses, thus further reinforcing the connections between scientific and religious responses to the unfurling of life and the unity of being. The environmental scientist James Lovelock, who formulated the “Gaia theory,” even suggests that religious metaphor and response may be essential to translating “conscious ideas into unconscious understanding” in order to “ignite an intuitive understanding of God and creation that cannot be falsified by rational argument” (Taylor 38).

**Regrounding Religion**

Dark green religion and the regrounding of religion have much in common. The interplay of secularization and resacralization describes the origins of dark green religion and underlies R. S. Thomas’s response.
Similarly, secularization – especially in the wake of scientific advancement – can be accompanied by the regrounding of religion and the re-hallowing of the world. Thomas, for instance, rethinks and expands the idea of God as the ground or unity of being, regrounding religion from within a post-Enlightenment world that challenges and delimits the presence of God.

As suggested earlier, this secularization is not necessarily a problem but potentially an opportunity for the regrounding of religion. James Lovelock provides an example of how a non-theistic, science-based naturalistic awareness can incorporate a reverence for “Gaia” – that is, the “living Earth” or biosphere which he describes as “a self-regulating organism” (Taylor 35-36). This can be termed a “religious” awareness because it encompasses that “felt sense of dependence, connection, and belonging to nature” – the sense of “being tied fast or connected” – that pertains to leig or religare. The resacralization of the Earth that has occurred alongside Lovelock’s unambiguous Gaian Naturalism also anticipates the regrounding of religion. A dialogue between science and religion, and the ability of religion to reground itself and respond to the unity of being, is clearly possible. Lovelock even suggests that “those with faith should look again at our Earthly home and see it as a holy place, part of God’s creation,” integrating “a reverence for Gaia into their theology and concern for all life into their ethics” (Taylor 37).

Thomas’s Gaian Spirituality reflects the kind of Earth religion which constitutes a religious response as conventional religions wane, opening up the idea of God within new, secular contexts. However, it should be noted that Thomas neither minimizes nor discounts his Christian faith. “It is not on Christianity that blame for the evils of the West is to be laid, but on what people have made of it,” he writes, affirming its merits and responsiveness in a
sceptical age (A 106). Thomas’s religious response is informed by Christian mysticism, which he suggests is not incompatible with the scientific approach to ultimate reality.

At the heart of regrounded religion lies what Rigby refers to as a “universally available human experience” in which:

The universe exists in uninterrupted activity and reveals itself to us in every moment [...] Thus to accept everything individual as a part of the whole and everything limited as a representation of the infinite is religion. (“Romanticism and Ecocriticism” 72)

Rigby here quotes the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, who describes what he believes underlies “diverse religious beliefs and practices.” Schleiermacher suggests there is a common religious awareness of unity that is ultimately poietic. His interpretation of the core religious experience also sounds close to Thomas’s “rough” definition of religion.

Similarly, Thomas acknowledges the shared truths of various religious practices and beliefs but, crucially, if the essence of religion is not “‘metaphysics’ and ‘morality’” (Rigby 72) then religion is not necessarily opposed to science. Equally, neither is religion rationalised away, for Schleiermacher’s relation of religion to “sensory perception” still has room for the spiritual. His view, for instance, reflects the “Romantic rehallowing of the phenomenal world as affording the ever-present possibility of that ephemeral, ineffable . . . mystical experience” (Rigby 72).

Ultimately, Thomas opens up a regrounded religious sensibility that can speak in a scientific world in order to reframe unity of being and reconcile science with an essentially religious, resacralizing awareness. His resacralizing project, then, occurs amidst and in tandem with secularization.
Schleiermacher, like Thomas, “looks to artists and writers for the renovation of religion against . . . the ‘new barbarism’ of an era dominated by analytic and instrumental forms of rationality,” notes Rigby (72). However, religion is not positioned to curb scientific vanity except when it comes to applied science. Regrounded religion offers “intimations of immanent holiness . . . as the essential counterpart and corrective to the scientific quest for knowledge and control of the physical world” (72–73). The “creative imagination” best bears “witness to the phenomenology of the religious experience: that Wordsworthian ‘sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused,’” as Rigby notes (72) and Thomas endorses. In these terms, religion appears as a form of poiesis, a way of looking at and experiencing the unconcealed ground of being when it is otherwise refracted through scientific lenses. Intriguingly, for Thomas this religious response is often captured through birdwatching.

**Nature Mysticis**

In his episode of *The South Bank Show*, R. S. Thomas explains that “God chooses to reveal himself . . . to people in different ways . . . He has evidently chosen to reveal himself to me through the natural world” (quoted in Morgan 53). So, what is the nature of Thomas’s “brushes” with God? In the previous chapter we saw how the poet-birdwatcher practised his poietic spirituality in order to dwell in his conception of God as the ground of being; now we will discuss his spiritual relationship to the natural world in terms of his regrounding of religion.
In a previously-mentioned passage from *A Year in Llŷn*, the birdwatcher provides an insight into the sense of spiritual wholeness he finds in nature:

I found a spot between the trees at Tŷ Mawr pool where I could stand and hear the wind roaring around me, together with the sound of the sea nearby. At moments such as these, every problem concerning the purpose of life, death and morality disappears, and man feels in touch with existence, pure and simple. For a moment he is one with creation, participating in the genius of life, as every creature in turn has done over millions of years. My name for such a rare, but not alien, experience is nature-mysticism. (A 122)

Here Thomas dwells on a naturalistic level: the “genius of life” and “millions of years” situate him within natural process. Yet we cannot overlook the spiritual way in which this naturalism is framed. The wind (and indeed “genius”) has that Romantic air of being both a “literal attribute of the landscape” and “the vehicle for a complex subjective event,” as M. H. Abrams might say (113). There is also a sense of inspiration – in the spiritual sense of *inspirare* – as well as a sense of communion and “vigor” following “spiritual torpor” (114). Indeed, the episode is preceded by observations of the “deterioration of life at the heart of the countryside,” and of the farmer freed from working the land by one machine, only to be imprisoned by another. The farmer “stare[s] at television of an evening” (A 121) and in enframing the land as his resource, as we discussed previously, he becomes cut off from his unity with it.

In the passage above, nature provides the antidote – the sense of a wider connection to the unity of being. We might think of how, similarly, the
air in “The Moor” (CP 166) crumbles “generously” upon the poet like the bread of communion – a symbolic expression of material-spiritual unity. He, like the birdwatcher in “Sea-watching,” is “simple and poor” but in a fundamental way, like the farmer in “Affinity” (CP 8), these figures have “the world for church.” Their connection to the unity of being is “pure” and “simple,” whole yet bare, material yet spiritual.

These are clues to understanding Thomas’s nature mysticism, which involves not transcendence away from the material world, per se, but transcendence to – and transcending the self for – a deeper unity with the world. After all, “matter is not half as solid” as we tend to think but, as discussed, “more akin to spirit” (“Unity” 33). In a sense, Thomas appears to find the “polarities” of naturalism and transcendentalism not to be “simple opposites,” as Taylor notes of Henry David Thoreau, but “complementary views” (Taylor 55). The sacred is discerned through their interplay, as in “The Place” and other texts yet to be discussed.

Thomas’s understanding of God as the ground of being, moreover, is grounded in the world, unlike the Christian mystics whose communion with the Divine involved transcending the material realm. Thomas observes that mysticism usually involves withdrawing from the “love of created things” (“Interview with Simon Barker” 313), but as a nature mystic he loves these things for the mystical experience of ultimate reality that they afford.18 “[T]he deity has chosen to mediate himself to me via the world, or even the universe, of nature,” Thomas explains (AE 19). “I have discovered God . . . under the

18 Cf. “The medieval Church feeling,” Thomas says in The South Bank Show, was “that it was a sin to fall in love with created things, and I would have to answer guilty to that sin” (Morgan 54).
stars at night, and in the workings of the created world,” he says, noting Wordsworthian “semi-mystical moments . . . of being in touch with creative spirit” (“Interview with Simon Barker” 313).

This means that Thomas is more panentheist than pantheist: in other words, nature mediates God. “[C]reated,” he explains, “is the key word. Nature isn’t my God. I’m not in love with things and scenes for themselves. They are the creation” (Morgan 55). Similarly, he notes that “Life” – by which he means the “endlessly repeated life-cycle” of natural process – “is not God” (“A Thicket in Lleyn” 101). God can be revealed in nature, but nature is not itself God – that is, the created world is not God alone but an expression or part of Him. This is consonant with Gaian Spirituality: the natural world is an expression and part of the ground of being that underlies a naturalistic ontology. “Whatever you mean by God, whatever you mean by ultimate reality,” Thomas states in one interview, “it is of a spiritual essence” (“Interview with Simon Barker” 304). God underlies and interpenetrates the universe as the ground of being – the underlying creative spirit. If life is God then the spiritual is either estranged from the material world or reduced to matter. As Thomas writes of this in “Unity”: it is “an enticing idea” but “[t]he trouble is that life lives upon life. How then can it be a god” (32). If only matter is “the basis of life” how does man, “composed of this same matter,” conceive the Divine and sacred value of the world, and his being in it, against the assumption that within the naturalistic order he is the “master of everything”? Certainly, spiritual forms of dark green religion do not exclusively convey the sacredness of nature (James Lovelock’s Gaia Theory is
a case in point), but historically the materialistic side of naturalism has often enabled environmental desecration.19

The unity of being that Thomas evokes – of spiritual and material – makes nature sacramental; the world is what he calls, elsewhere, the “incarnation of spirit” (“A Thicket in Lleyn” 101). Thomas’s embrace of the sensuous world as affording that “universally available” religious experience is especially emphatic in his poetry of birdwatching. Finally, in a comment to Simon Barker, Thomas reiterates his spiritual dependence on a sensuous, visible nature:

I know it’s not everything, but I’m exceedingly fond of the visual world and, as you know, strictly orthodox meditation and prayer is a shutting-out of the visual world, to withdraw into a non-sensuous, or -sensual (sic) environment or atmosphere, which I’m not really prepared to do. . . . I realise only too well that the visual world isn’t everything, it isn’t even the most important thing, but it’s one of the ways I feel that reality mediates itself to me, and therefore I’m not going to try and shut it away.

(“Interview with Simon Barker” 300)

Furthermore, Thomas’s mystical transcendence to a deeper unity with the world reflects his understanding of the eternity that is here, not “over there.” This also recognizes the ultimate value and sacredness of the natural world. Firstly, there is the “genius of life” that continues over “millions of years,” and the way that natural process – especially for a birdwatcher so attuned to the turn of the seasons – reflects natural continuity. The birdwatcher’s restfulness

19 See Taylor 35-37.
at the end of “The Place” (*CP* 207), for instance, is in part due to his awareness of such continuity. “Summer is here,” the poem begins, and though it is a “brief / Season” it, and the martins, will return to “fill” the birdwatcher. As part of this natural process the speaker is “Inviolate through [his] outward changes.” There is a deeper, timeless sense of continuity with the creation because (as the line also suggests) he grows old.

Secondly, in the same poem, the fountain imagery also puts this in spiritual terms. The martins are described as “Proust’s fountain / Of small birds,” which seemingly refers to the imaginary Hubert Robert fountain in the fourth volume of Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, suggesting that Thomas’s image is one of eternity and unbroken being. Notably, in his essay “Two Chapels” Thomas also speaks of a timeless vision in which “I realised there was really no such thing as time, no beginning and no end but that everything is a fountain welling up endlessly from immortal God” (*Prose* 44). The natural world is part of the sacred, spiritual dimension. In liminal, bare spaces like the Llŷn peninsula or the Welsh moorlands, Thomas experiences intimations of the eternal and, like Wordsworth, “with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony” he “see[s] into the life of things” (*MW* 134), the unity of being. Thus, Thomas boldly goes so far as to say, indicating nature’s value, that “if there is life after this one, and if it does not contain things akin to those so dear to [me] in Wales – the streams, the moorland, the birds, the flowers – [I do not] want to experience it” (*A* 105).

Christopher Morgan further explains Thomas’s nature mysticism and its “complex interplay” with “pure mysticism.” “The experience of pure mysticism,” he writes, is traditionally “said to be encouraged not through sensual participation in the created world but precisely by continued
abstention from that world” (54). The “spiritual encounter” that may follow involves the suspension of the senses – of one’s material being-in-the-world – before an experience of the “dimensions of pure spirit.” The nature mystic, however, experiences ultimate reality “in and through” the “dimensions of sense experience” (55). Thomas’s nature mysticism is simultaneously spiritual and naturalistic: there is no spiritual-material dualism. The relation of religious experience to sensory perception in Thomas’s religious response also recalls Schleiermacher and the regrounding of religion.

Yet the ascetic practice of pure mysticism, as Morgan notes, also informs the via negativa which the “hermit / of the rocks” embraces in “Sea-watching” (CP 306). “It is when one is not looking, / at times one is not there,” the speaker says, that the mystical “absence” that “was as its presence” occurs. How do we reconcile this with Thomas’s nature mysticism? Firstly, there is the negative capability at the heart of Thomas’s approach to ultimate reality. God, as we saw in the last chapter, is the Stevensian “nothing that is not there and . . . nothing that is.” As Thomas puts it in “Via Negativa” (CP 220):

God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within . . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars.

Thus God – as the ground of being – can only be approached through the mystical via negativa because this does not delimit His presence in the world. Awareness of the unity of being requires an approach that does not reduce or
delimit ultimate reality. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, “not looking” and being “not there” signify a negative ecopoethic, a deeper state of being or dwelling. There is no question of transcendence except where it concerns transcending the self for unity of being. Significantly, Thomas writes in “Unity” that “losing consciousness of the self is a sign of illness in the West, but in the East it is a step on the path towards wisdom” (38-39).

Thomas’s interest, at this point, is “unity with your fellow-men,” but it extends much further to “the ability to forget about yourself and to lose yourself in the feeling that you are a member of the whole organism, as God willed you to be[.]”

These tensions within nature mysticism further explain Thomas’s conception of God as the ground of being: that which neither transcends the material world nor is limited to it. Thomas’s focus on nature is not at the expense of mystically experiencing ultimate reality – that “spiritual essence” – or vice versa. Thomas complicates the boundaries between spiritual and material, extrasensory and sensory, thereby opening up the presence of God towards his conception of the unity of being. Thus, “habited with the wind / and the mist” the birdwatcher in “Sea-watching” retains an elemental yet liminal grounding in the sensory world through which he discerns the “higher reality” (Morgan 55), the absence that is a presence. Nature remains fundamental to the mystical experience of God as more than nature. Therefore, the almost-paradox of “nature mysticism” indicates Gaian Spirituality not Gaian Naturalism.

A Thicket in Llŷn: Nature Mysticism and Gaian Spirituality
Thomas’s nature mysticism and dark green religion are most strikingly conveyed in his short essay “A Thicket in Lleyn,” published amongst reflections on the landscape by British writers. The episode Thomas describes, in which a flock of migrating goldcrests – not martins, this time – initiates a mystical connection with the ground of being, illustrates the regrounded religious experience that is the poiesis of birdwatching.

The experience in the thicket presents birdwatching as a poietic response to what Thomas, reflecting on issues like those in “Unity” elsewhere calls a “scientific . . . mechanized and impersonal age, an analytic and clinical . . . age in which under the hard gloss of affluence there can be detected the murmuring of the starved heart and the uneasy spirit” (Prose 93). Birdwatching forms a crucial “religious” response that is poietic because it involves revealing the unconcealed ground of being. After all, religion “has to do first of all with vision, revelation” (90).

The experience is framed against the fractured unity of being found in the world of the Machine. In the thicket essay Thomas is wary of acts of “misplaced tidiness or improved farming” (“A Thicket in Lleyn” 101). Such language rings of technological “progress” and the resultant enframing of the land – that is, notions of how it “should” be according to anthropocentric assessments, whether aesthetic or economic. Thomas, however, sees the thicket as “Infinite riches in a little room” (92). The allusion, taken from Christopher Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta, is pointed: Thomas counterpoints Barabas’s materialistic meaning with his own dark green regard for the material world. “[R]iches” is taken in a non-materialistic way (in both senses of the word) as Thomas explores the inseparable material and spiritual riches at hand. Accordingly, his protectiveness at the end of the essay is driven not by
a desire for finite wealth but a recognition of the infinite, ultimate treasure that is here, the unity of being in which the infinite and finite interweave.

Similarly, in A Year in Llŷn, where he also mentions the thicket episode, the birdwatcher reflects on the experience amidst “the implications of lack of faith in God and eternal life,” which he gives as “total extinction for us and our loved ones” (A 144). By “us” Thomas means Welshmen, but the atheistic effects of English technological colonialism also extend to the Earth. As Chapter Six explores, the “English” mode of being – which is tied to the hegemony of the Machine and mechanistic science – represents a threat to “native” spiritual connection to the earth and, in turn, the connections between Welsh culture and nature. For Thomas, this disunity is more widely representative of that between human and nature and the loss of a religious sensibility. Indeed, just before he tells of the goldcrests, Thomas gives his familiar account of turning to birdwatching amidst the apocalyptic effects of “modern technology”:

it was through seeing the old comely things that I loved disappearing, or being disfigured by modern technology, that I turned increasingly to bird-watching. Away from the din and violence of the world, away from man’s apathy and cruelty even . . . [to watch] the birds go by . . . waiting for a vision of God. (A 144)

Thomas achieves this vision as he watches the goldcrests, but it is in the essay that he fully develops its spiritual significance. The experience in A Year in Llŷn is instead naturalistic, like the memoir in general. It is about nature coming “to accept you” (A 144) in language that appeals to the sensibilities of dark green religion. The memoir is symptomatic of a time in which the
growing distance of society from the natural world has prompted a resurgence in nature writing. Thomas therefore emphasizes natural unity and one’s being-in-the-world rather than a perhaps exclusive, mystical oneness with the ground of being.

In the essay, though, Thomas recalls how, returning to a “dear” thicket situated on a “thoroughfare for migrants,” he was once “thronged” for a “timeless moment” by a passing flock of goldcrests that “re-leafed” the “bare spinney” (“A Thicket in Lleyn” 92, 96). He initially describes the experience with uncertainty:

The air purred with their small wings. . . . Everywhere their needle-sharp cries stitched at the silence. Was I invisible? Their seed-bright eyes regarded me from three feet off. Had I put forth an arm, they might have perched on it. I became a tree, part of that bare spinney where silently the light was splintered, and for a timeless moment the birds thronged me, filigreeing me with shadow, moving to an immemorial rhythm on their way south.

Then suddenly they were gone, leaving other realities to return . . . and lastly myself. Where had I been? Who was I? What did it all mean? While it was happening, I was not. Now that the birds had gone, here I was once again. Such things, no doubt, had occurred before and other humans . . . had been a part of them for their own timeless moment, before returning to themselves, involuntary prodigals. Was this Coleridge’s experience? To him . . . it was the imagination which was
primary: ‘a repetition in the finite mind of the infinite I AM.’ Is that what had happened to me? Had that infinite I announced itself in a thicket in Lleyn . . . in the small birds that had taken possession of it, and in the reflection of this in a human being? And had the I in me joined seemingly unconsciously in that announcement; and is that what eternity is? And was the mind that returned to itself but finite mind? (96).

But lest this “interpretation” of his wordless, unconscious experience be too suggestive of naturalistic, mechanistic unity – of “the endlessly repeated life-cycle” (101) and thus of human insignificance – Thomas distinguishes between the Coleridgean experience of the infinite and the physicality of the natural cycle. Migration, natural process, and his unconscious communion with the birds, it seems, lead Thomas to clarify that within the (in a sense) timeless, but not infinite, natural-world context there is a yet “greater reality,” in Tony Brown’s words (R. S. Thomas 114).

Thus, Thomas is sceptical of Yeats’s line that “out of life’s own self-delight had sprung the abounding, glittering jet” (“A Thicket in Lleyn” 101). He states that:

Life is not I; is certainly not God. There is a conventional magnifying of life at the expense of the I. But what is that? Life feeds on life, and has an unconscious, inscrutable, repetitive quality.

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20 i.e. “first” or “God,” the original creative force or process. As Coleridge writes, “The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (167).
In “Unity,” he similarly asks, “Life lives upon life. How then can it be a god?” (32). After all, as he reflects rhetorically,

> What talons and beaks were not in waiting for the goldcrests on their way south, to be themselves devoured by the huge maw of the sea over which other goldcrests would return north on the spring passage? (“A Thicket in Lleyn” 101)

Accordingly, Thomas comes to understand that what he experienced was not the goldcrests (or nature) as God – a naturalistic pantheism, in other words – but the deeper unity. This cycle of predation is only a finite naturalistic part of the greater infinite creative process that he encountered and tries to convey. Instead, Thomas’s mystical, panentheistic experience in nature afforded an intimation of the eternal, which Tony Brown describes as a “fleeting intuition of a unifying reality beyond time” (*R. S. Thomas* 113).

> When Thomas returns to self-consciousness, after the moment has passed, he then realizes that this *return* – from somewhere beyond the material world and the present moment – attests to a more-than-material and mechanistic reality:

> No, while the experience lasted, I was absent or in abeyance. It was when I returned to myself that I realized that I was other, more than the experience, able to stand back and comprehend it by means of the imagination, and so by this act of creation to recognize myself not as lived by, but as part of the infinite I AM. (“A Thicket in Lleyn” 101)

Thomas’s meaning is not precisely clear, but he intimates a deeper, more than material and finite reality with which he feels at one. His ability “to stand back and comprehend [the experience] by means of the imagination” signifies that
there is a spiritual side to being, a greater whole of which he is a “part.”

Indeed, Thomas understands the imagination, following Coleridge’s philosophy, as “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (Coleridge 167). Accordingly, he is “part of the infinite I AM,” dwelling within an eternal creative and spiritual process that underlies material reality. There is more to his existence than his involvement in mechanistic, natural process.

Thomas’s confusing explanation re-emphasizes how reality is not simply reducible to material or naturalistic process, which is not what he experienced in the thicket when his self-consciousness was in “abeyance.” Thomas glimpses the ground of being and realizes the deeper unity or “greater reality” of which he is a part. He looks at the indifferent processes behind the “talons” and “maw of the sea” and sees not nature or Life as God, not a separate God who somehow ordains this world, but God as the eternal creative – and, as we will see in the following chapters, destructive – ground of being. In the thicket the “rare bird” of “Sea-watching,” one might say, momentarily flies into Thomas’s ken.

Thus the thicket experience reveals the underlying spiritual foundation and unity of being. As Thomas makes sense of what happened, he evokes Gaian Spirituality. The mystical moment was not an experience of Life (or Gaian Naturalism) but of a “unifying reality beyond time” (Brown, R. S. Thomas 113). In Christopher Morgan’s words, Thomas is “contextualised in a wider cosmic world made radically present through nature” (63) – the “wider ecocosmic dimension of our being,” as Rigby would say (“Earth, World, Text” 431). A deeper reality lies beneath the physical and time-bound; an underlying creative energy that is “God.” The goldcrests’ presence, according to Morgan,
is “simultaneously natural presence and divine presence . . . [and] Thomas seems to be suggesting that in this moment he is thronged by divinity itself” in a “splintering of time and space” (63–64). In this mystical moment amidst a whirlwind of birds, Thomas momentarily comprehends the unity of being and dwells in the “infinite I AM.” It is another mystical experience of feeling, such as he describes elsewhere, “that he had always been there, part of the unbroken chain of being” (A 78).

The thicket experience also helps explain Thomas’s nature mysticism and its dark green ties. Thomas’s immersion in the life of the thicket culminates in a flight from isolated selfhood to an “unconscious commingling of the individual soul,” as Christopher Morgan writes (64), with the infinite I AM. However, this mystical, transcendent experience is balanced by the return to embodied selfhood and a realization that nature is sacred for affording such experiences. Thus, while nature offers visions of ultimate reality, this is apprehended via a kind of transcendence of the material world through the imagination. Yet, insofar as the imagination is an expression of the primary creative force of the universe, there is also no transcendence at all, only a deeper state of being. As Thomas writes, the infinite I AM “announced itself . . . in the small birds that had taken possession of [the thicket], and in the reflection of this in a human being.”

This gets to the heart of the unity of material and spiritual in the essay. Significantly, it is the return to selfhood that proves the birdwatcher’s spiritual being. When the goldcrests suddenly depart, Thomas is brought back down to earth, to himself, as a being distinct from merely material process by virtue of his imaginative self-consciousness. But this distinctness is ultimately understood as evidence of – and the means by which it is understood –
Thomas’s connection to the deeper “unifying reality” which exceeds the binary of matter and spirit. The ability to “stand back and comprehend . . . by means of the imagination” is, ironically, the way forward to dwelling in the unity of being.

Thomas explores this unity further in the poem “A Thicket in Lleyn” (CP 511), in which the speaker learns to

\[
\text{Navigate by such stars as are not leaves falling from life's deciduous tree, but spray from the fountain of the imagination, endlessly replenishing itself out of its own waters.}
\]

This puts things into a different perspective; the speaker’s course is surer, set within an underlying spiritual unity rather than a finite, mechanistic existence. Thomas rejects the meaninglessness of what he refers to, in the thicket essay, as “talk of the minute drop returning to the boundless ocean” (101). Instead, in the goldcrests’ implicitly finite migrations within the timeless migrations of nature he finds an expression of the eternal ground of being in which he must also “navigate” and reorient himself. Birdwatching, then, enables what M. Wynn Thomas describes as the “intersection of time with eternity” in the poet-birdwatcher’s work (R. S. Thomas 230). In other words, Thomas arrives at T. S. Eliot’s “still point of the turning world” where he can dwell (“Burnt Norton,” Collected Poems 177) – especially in the timeless moment described in the essay.

In the poem, the goldcrests, rather than the speaker’s experience, are themselves “‘A repetition in time of the eternal / I AM’” – in Coleridge’s precise terms: a “repetition of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.”
As in the essay, the birds re-leaf “the trees, budding them” anew like leaves from the eternal fountain of creativity or Coleridge’s “primary imagination.” The image of “spray from the fountain / of the imagination” poetically transforms the essay’s picture of ultimate reality. Yeats’s “abounding, glittering jet” sprung “out of life’s own self-delight” is exchanged for the deeper, truly infinite creative process that underlies the universe. In the goldcrests, Thomas senses the “energy of being-itself” which, as Brown explains, is “recurrently figured . . . as an endlessly self-renewing fountain of creativity” (*R. S. Thomas* 112). Thus, we will recall Thomas’s essay “Two Chapels” in which he writes that: “there was really no such thing as time, . . . everything is a fountain welling up endlessly from immortal God” (*Prose* 44). The fountain imagery also expands the significance of the “spray of martins, Proust’s fountain / Of small birds” in “The Place.” The sense of unity in that poem, within the continuity and timelessness of nature, we now realize to be even more “Inviolate” and sacred than was discussed in Chapter One.21 With all this in motion, the speaker in the thicket poem encourages himself (and seemingly his reader) to “Escape from your mortal cage / in thought” for “Your migrations will never be over.”

The understanding of this deeper unifying reality beyond time is further developed in “Swallows” (*CLP* 253), where another flock of birds prompts reflection on the deeper unity beneath natural process. The speaker farewells the swallows on their winter migration, musing on his own mortality – like the goldcrests’ – amidst this metaphor for death and rebirth. Life is merely repetition, he suggests; there is a greater creative force that underlies

21 Compare also “Hafod Lom” (*CP* 156) where “music / From a solitary robin plays / Like a small fountain” in another timeless natural place.
existence. Though there “will be swallows” again next year, they may not be “[t]hese swallows.” Their collective continuity is timelessly assured, but their individual time on earth is finite. However, the birdwatcher’s “migrations / are endless, though [his] perch / be of bone.” “[L]ife will replace / me,” he admits, but he suggests that in some fundamental way he will leave and return endlessly in unlimited permutations as part of the eternal creative process. He is a “migrant / between nominatives” – that is, between identities, liminal, material and spiritual. As such, he is himself timeless, a “new singer of an old / song,” a being whose essential being exists outside of time. Thus, Thomas again conveys his sense of unity with the infinite and his Gaian Spirituality.

But on another level, the thicket poem also suggests that thought cages us within a finite, linear perception of reality. The rational mind, from its position of apartness and self-consciousness, must be quietened in order to perceive the timeless ground of being. The speaker must also “distrust the distrust of feeling,” as Thomas says in “Perhaps” (CP 353), in order to embrace an intuitive, embodied sense of unity. Thus, both thicket narratives reflect a regrounded conception of religious experience as ultimate reality reveals itself to the senses.

However, as the line-break suggests, “thought” is also the means of escaping one’s “mortal cage.” This suggests that while thought may be a barrier to unity, the mind itself is not separated from the ground of being, imagination is a “repetition in the finite mind of the infinite I AM.” The speaker declares that “Between two truths / there is only the mind to fly with,” suggesting that in navigating by the imagination, as a repetition of the primary imagination, we are able to “fly” or “migrate” between the two truths or poles of our being as material and spiritual creatures. This is a striking
vision of unity. Where Descartes, as Kate Soper notes, placed “humanity outside the order of nature” (44), Thomas evokes the migrations of the mind within a deeper unifying reality. It is in the mind that one may realize one’s endless “migrations,” one’s more-than-material unity with the infinite.

Similarly, “Migrants” (CLP 204) further frames Thomas’s Gaian conception of the deeper unifying reality and the human connection to it. In the poem, God is the undelimited “great void,” the ground of being to which we – migrant birds who may “never arrive / to breed or to winter / in the climate of our conception” – are drawn by our innate unity with it. However, though we may never reach this source of our being – the destination of the mind’s migrations, the original creative force experienced in the thicket which we may never fully conceptualize and be in – Thomas suggests that our inbuilt attraction to it, like migrating birds, is enough evidence of this deeper reality. Therefore, it is

   Enough we have been given wings
   and a needle in the mind
   to respond to [God’s] bleak north.

Notably, the only revelation of the Divine is a non-revelation – a non-conceptualization – which is an expression of the poietic (and apophatic) religious awareness that Thomas navigates. Moreover, while we may never have Wallace Stevens’s “mind of winter” (thankfully, it seems) we do have an instinctive sensory perception of the ineffable, which describes Thomas’s regrounded religious experience and is itself an expression of unity.

22 Specifically, God is “the Pole” that is the centre of our existence, perhaps also like Eliot’s “still point of the turning world” (“Burnt Norton,” CP 177).
Thus Thomas not only frames the unity of material and spiritual but that of human and nature. He describes escaping our “cage / in thought” for an imaginative experience of unity, towards which we are led instinctively and determinedly like birds on their migrations. In this moment of unity, in the thicket texts, the birdwatcher becomes “netted” in the goldcrests’ “shadows” and “brushed . . . with sound” (CP 511). He is caught-up in the infinite creative process, becoming a “tree” “thronged” by the birds, “filigree[d] . . . with [their] shadows,” and “forgotten” within the life of the thicket (“A Thicket in Lleyn” 96). The goldcrests move through and heal the “fissures” in his being (CP 511). The mind is not a barrier to but rather the site of unity.

Thomas’s experience of being “at one with, ‘at home’ in, some greater reality” (Brown, R. S. Thomas 114) thus becomes something for which to strive. He turns protectively to nature:

I am not telling you where this [thicket] is, lest too many go there to deflower it. But leave it and others like it for the individual to have such experiences in. Maybe it is only a minute strand of the great web of being, but once broken it cannot be repaired. So with all the means available today do not uproot it or level it in an act of misplaced tidiness or improved farming. (“A Thicket in Lleyn” 101)

“I]nfinite riches” lie in even this “minute” corner of the natural world. This means that Thomas “[n]avigate[s]” within a wider spiritual context and the experience encourages him, in Sam Perry’s words, “to recognise the sacred as something that is embedded within the fabric of everyday life” (“Hoping for the reciprocal touch” 193). Thus the experience evokes the regrounding of religion as Thomas re-hallows the “phenomenal world as affording the ever-
present possibility of that ephemeral, ineffable . . . mystical experience” (Rigby, “Romanticism and Ecocriticism” 72).

Accordingly, Thomas ends the essay with a telling expression of Gaian Spirituality:

I see [the thicket] as ribs of a body; body as the incarnation of spirit, and spirit returns to eternity and significance when it declares: I am, holding all things in balance; spiralling outward upon itself into infinite space and inward towards the smallest of atoms, awake or dormant in a thicket in Lleyn. (101)

Thomas here envisions the holistic union of material and spiritual, reframing nature as sacramental. He also embraces, to an extent, the language of physics, suggesting again that there is no necessary opposition between pure science and religious awareness.

Similarly, in “The Bright Field” (CP 302) Thomas resacralizes the earth following an experience of the eternal. The sun illuminates “a small field” that the passing speaker later realizes “was the pearl / of great price, the one field that had / the treasure in it.” This revelation of the Divine and eternal within the material world encourages the speaker to turn aside to the eternal beauty of nature, which Thomas links to the Kingdom of Heaven. The speaker seeks to cultivate another intersection of time and eternity, another timeless moment of dwelling, in order to tack against the time-obsessed world of the Machine which obscures the ground and unity of being. The speaker realizes that “I must give all that I have / To possess” that treasure, for

Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

As Christopher Morgan explains, encountering the eternity-that-is-nature involves “an overturning of the corrupting influence of time and a corresponding realisation of eternity” (39). The speaker suggests that one only has to turn aside – which we have seen entails “an acceptance of the spiritual plenitude at hand” – in order to ground “Life” within the deeper unity and significance that is “the eternity that awaits.” This is to realize that one’s “migrations will never / be over” in a way that goes beyond immortality to a fundamental connection with the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.

In “Blackbird” (UP 160), which first appeared in a periodical two years before Thomas’s death, the infinite ground of being is again glimpsed through birdwatching. Thomas approaches this from a position of existential contemplation – not unlike Keats in “To Autumn” – that revisits his earlier poem “A Blackbird Singing” (CP 85). Likewise, both birds’ music is “rich” because, like the thicket and bright field, it holds “infinite riches.” The poet’s sense of unity re-hallows the material world by reframing the presence of the Divine in what would otherwise seem a hostile, meaningless reality.

As he contemplates a blackbird, the speaker reflects that its eye has a depth and darkness that contains the cosmic dimensions of reality:

Its eye [is] a dark pool
in which Sirius glitters
and never goes out.
The infinite spirals outward and inward upon itself in the blackbird’s eye, as in
the thicket; it bends the boundaries of the material and spiritual, collapses the
barriers of time and space.

Confronted by this dark abyss – the seeming endlessness and
emptiness of the universe – the speaker finds that the blackbird’s song seems
“husky / as though with suppressed tears.” Like its earlier counterpart, the
bird’s slow song carries a heavy knowledge of darkness and grief, but equally
its bright bill is

the gold

one quarries for amid

evening shadows.

There is an echo, here, of “The Bright Field” and the presence of the eternal.
Indeed the bird’s rich song – which in the earlier poem encompasses, “love,
joy, / And grief” – reassures the speaker in his existential anxiety. “Do not
despair / at the stars’ distance,” he says. “[B]eyond the silence / which
terrified Pascal / there is a presence” which redeems that emptiness and
nothingness. One is not to despair, then, at the “chasms / of space-time” and
what may be an impersonal loneliness in the universe. The speaker reviews
the silence and emptiness of nature and reality, finding the absence that is
itself a deeper, encompassing presence.

The speaker’s faith comes from a nature mystic’s openness to revelation
and intuitive, sensory perception of ultimate reality. Thus, he explains that

Listening
to blackbird music is
to bridge in a moment chasms
of space-time, is to know
that beyond the silence

.........................

There is a presence.

Blackbird music enables the ecstatic migration of the mind to the “climate of our conception,” as “Migrants” calls it. Birdsong transports one to the eternal “climate” of being, where one can experience the presence of God as the ground of being – that absence.

Instead of silence at the end of the tunnel, “God is in the throat of a bird,” as Thomas puts it in “The Minister” (CP 43). Thomas’s nature mysticism counters what Kate Soper calls the historical “cosmological shift” (43) when animistic views of nature were replaced by mechanistic ones. In the blackbird’s eye and music Thomas intuits the unity of God and Nature, spirit and matter. He is direct in his belief that nature conveys the Divine, for the “presence” is

a presence
whose language
is not our language, but who has chosen
with peculiar charity the feathered
creatures to convey the austerity
of his thought in song.

The speaker suggests that birds “convey” the presence of the Divine not only in their song but in their very presence, the “peculiar charity” out of which they have been “chosen.” Their beneficent presence, in contradicting the bleak “austerity” of a post-Enlightenment view of reality, simultaneously conveys the rich presence of a deeper unity and meaningfulness and the “austerity / of his thought” – that is, the absence that is not a being but being itself.
Thomas’s blackbirds, after all, have the “suggestion of dark / Places about
[them]” and yet “Such rich music” pours forth – peculiarly, contrarily – from
“that bright bill” (“A Blackbird Singing”). The blackbirds convey, in other
words, the complex “austerity” – the harshness, transcendence, bareness, self-
abnegation, unknowability – and yet caritas of the deus absconditus, the
“presence” that in being all things is no thing, self-less, and infinite.

The birds thus poietically convey the unconcealed, undelimited being of
the Divine. In the poem’s manuscript, “peculiar” is chosen over “strange” as if
to suggest that Divine “charity” is not so much foreign to the speaker, or
unexpected, but the distinctive quality of one whose ways are not our ways.23

The poem therefore evokes Thomas’s interest in “the quarrel between the
conception of God as a person, as having a human [and explainable] side, and
the conception of God as being so extraordinary” (Price-Owen 97). “I’m trying
to appeal to people to open their eyes and their minds to the extraordinary
nature of God,” he explains. As discussed in the next chapter, this is in order
to re-assert the presence of the spiritual in the material world and recover a
sense of unity.

“Blackbird” also suggests, romantically, that birdsong is the “chosen”
poietic medium of the Divine, that it strikes a chord within the listener and
arouses an intuitive, wordless “sense sublime” (Wordsworth, MW 134). Birds
poietically “convey” ultimate reality without circumscribing or concealing it in
language – a meaning which might have been lost had Thomas preserved the
original closing line in which birds are God’s nominated “translators.” While
the latter would truthfully acknowledge that “something is lost” in language,

23 This can be found in the Bangor University archive collection for R. S. Thomas. Bangor
Archives Box (P) (2) “Poems first significant purchase of poems,” Item 7.
as Thomas puts it in “Kneeling” (CP 199), to translate God here would be to further obscure and defer meaning. Instead, Thomas explores how birdsong induces an imaginative and sensory rather than intellectual response which allows the listener to intuit the incomprehensible fullness of the Divine. After all, God’s “language / is not our language” and His “austerity” means that ultimate reality cannot be quantified. Accordingly, this sensory ability to receive ultimate reality reflects Thomas’s regrounded perception of the religious experience, as well as the mind’s connectedness to the “climate” of unity. This not only evokes how the natural world conveys the spiritual but further “bridge[s]” the gap between the embodied and the spiritual. Listening to birdsong transcends the divisions of time and language, material and spiritual.

Finally, in the late poem “Bird Watching” (CLP 265), Thomas commends birdwatchers as a tribe of people to whom the unity of being is revealed against the distractions of the “world.” Birdwatching is again a religious act that is tied to a dark green, Gaian understanding of the sacredness of the earth.

In this poem the speaker chooses “to observe birds” in the Mediterranean, seemingly to “impinge on the Telegraph’s / stop press” and seek instead a timeless moment of unity. The birds’ “wavering italics” invite comparison with the frenetic technological world that hurries, as in “The Bright Field,” “on to a receding future.” The birds are a different kind of media; a gentle, alternative focus.

In order to emphasize the quiet subversiveness of birdwatching, Thomas then compares birdwatchers with the young, elite gentlemen of the eighteenth century who went abroad on their “grand tour.” Birdwatching
becomes something of a Romantic, spiritual pilgrimage rather than a pursuit of culture and a mark of status or material affluence. Unlike those gentlemen, for whom “[t]he post chaise / was a necessary adjunct” of the tour, the birdwatchers modestly hitchhike, “thumb[ing] / our way.” They are even, perhaps, a nuisance: “[a] thousand / binoculars winnow / the thin haze” and the birdwatchers’ arrival is “as unsuspected as an occurrence / of influenza.”

Birdwatching was best, for Thomas, as a solitary pursuit, but these lines also make the obsession comically and endearingly peculiar. Thomas does not idealize or distance the birdwatchers as religiously austere and unrelatable. There is an element of bathos that makes these ordinary, down-to-earth people, and their sublime experience, accessible and resonant. The birdwatchers are normal, real people; their eyes – like the young gentleman of the grand tour – “would be penetrating / the young women’s amorphous / clothing” except that here they are focused on birds and a spiritual experience. The birdwatchers instead “notice / the lack of cosmetics / that distinguish one warbler / from another.” Here there is gentle self-mockery too, which lightens the tone and brings birdwatching down-to-earth rather than makes it serious or aloof.

Indeed, the birdwatchers’ numbers are ultimately reassuring: there are “still people / like us.” In particular, there are still people who can be “still,” who can “migrate” in such a way as enables them to be or dwell “in a world” that has “appropriated flight” having bought into its restlessness and technological appropriation of natural wonders. The birdwatchers are able to inhabit the unity of being and transcend the so-called “quotidian” world for a religious experience. Thus, the birdwatcher-speaker appeals to his Greco-Roman patron god, or perhaps the “rare bird” in “Sea-watching”:
Winged God
approve that in a world
that has appropriated flight
to itself there are still people
like us, who believe
in the ability of the heart
to migrate, if only momentarily
between the quotidian and the sublime. ("Bird Watching")

Here the speaker suggests that birdwatching can lead to mystical migrations between the material, natural world and the supernatural. The way that birdwatchers transcend or rather “migrate” – which implies a return and thus a material and spiritual being – “between” the ordinary or everyday, and the extraordinary or rare, also reflects the nature mystic’s value for the natural world. It is within a seemingly mundane world that the birdwatchers discover and experience the “sublime.” In other words, the sublime and sacred lie within or beneath the quotidian. Out of the unglamorous and monotonous – yet surely meditative – activity of distinguishing warblers comes the sublime revelation. The quotidian, then, is in a sense not so. This Gaian Spirituality reflects the revelation, or poiesis, of birdwatching – the recognition, once again, of “the sacred as something that is embedded within the fabric of everyday life” (Perry, “Hoping for the reciprocal touch” 193). There is no transcendence, as such, only a deeper awareness which birds and birdwatching enable. On that note, birds seem to provide Thomas with the perfect metaphor throughout his work for the so-called quotidian yet sublime world that passes us by. If we just looked, he suggests over and over again, then we might happen upon the deeper unity that is concealed by the everyday
world we have constructed around us. Thus, birdwatching is inseparable from poiesis, and Thomas “approve[s]” or commends birdwatchers.

But the significance of birdwatching does not stop here. In the poem it is the “heart,” not the soul or mind, that “migrate[s].” Thomas implies that the way birdwatchers migrate is neither intellectual nor wholly mystical but grounded, embodied, and intuitive. “[M]igrate” suggests that not only do the birdwatchers not transcend the material world but they respond to a deeper unity or natural process, to the pull of an inborn connection to the ground and unity of being – like that in “Migrants.” This is “God,” the dwelling-place, the “climate of our conception.”

Thus, in “Bird Watching” the birdwatchers never leave except to return. Out of a deeper attunement, like that in Thomas’s thicket, the birdwatchers “migrate . . . / between” their material and conscious being, and the deeper being within which they are at home. Importantly, these “people / like us” return, as in “Blackbird,” with knowledge of the sublime, vast nature of God. In this light “approve” not only signifies a request that God commend birdwatchers but a prayer that more people will be birdwatchers.
Chapter Four: Birds of Prey

One God for the drowsy villagers
In the matte black pews, and another,
True God, for the squealing curlew
And the red kite on her found nest.

Mark Jarman, “R. S. Thomas”

So far, we have seen how the poiesis of birdwatching influences R. S. Thomas’s conception of God as the ground of being. But how is birdwatching implicated in his questioning of God in the first place? Moreover, how does this confrontation with God further reflect an ecological regrounding of religion? Chapter Four explores the issue of natural violence in regard to this, while Chapter Five extends the discussion into the question of the via negativa and Thomas’s arrival at the unknowability and otherness of God.

As a birdwatcher and nature mystic, Thomas’s naturalistic attentiveness to the beautiful yet also harsh cycle of life and death challenged conventional, romanticized ideas about God. Thomas had to confront the fullness of what nature revealed – the God who also “ordained,” as Christopher Morgan writes, the “cycle of violence and consumption upon which the earth appears to turn” (77). At Tŷ Mawr, where Thomas had felt “one with creation,” a peregrine falcon had left behind two headless gulls (A 114). Similarly, when Thomas experienced the ground of being amidst that flurry of goldcrests in Llyn, he was also aware of the “talons and beaks” that awaited them on their migrations over the sea’s “huge maw” (“A Thicket in
Lleyn” 101). Moreover, when Thomas interrogated anthropocentric ideas about God and nature that complicated spiritual and material unity, he found “the hand of God” in the “savagery of the evolutionary process,” in Simon Barker’s words (Thomas, “Interview with Simon Barker” 307).

“[M]any of the problems of religion,” Thomas writes, “arise in the wake of erroneous ideas concerning God, which cause us to ask erroneous questions. Our image of God must be transformed” (A 107). In particular, Thomas realizes that anthropomorphic ideas of God as a discrete being – the God of love, for instance – confine and restrict His being and presence in the world of nature. The incompatibility of such erroneous assumptions with the world as revealed by science threatens the unity of being. God comes to appear separate from the material world rather than the encompassing ground of being. The natural world becomes mere mechanistic process while the absence or irrelevance of God lends credibility to scientific reductionism, legitimizing the exploitation of a now desacralized world. The inability to reconcile God with violence, suffering, and death can also lead to what Thomas calls “world-negation,” that is, the “mediaevalist’s depreciation of this life” and “corresponding eagerness for the next” (“Introduction” to A Choice of George Herbert's Verse 16). The conception of God’s separateness disconnects us from our material being in the world; we become “on the main road / To God,” as Thomas puts it in “The Parish” (CP 101), oblivious to the eternity that is here. But if God is the ground and source of our being, in which violence and beauty are interwoven, then there is, as Thomas says at the end of one meditative essay, “no need to go anywhere from here” (Prose 152). Alongside us, in other words, “is the heaven we seek.”
Thus, reframing and enlarging the idea of God according to the natural world provides ways of understanding His presence in the material world and resacralizing it. The question becomes not whether God exists, or if He is present in such a world, but what kind of God He is. Indeed, Thomas’s literary executor, M. Wynn Thomas, recalls a conversation in which the poet explained that “the question for me is not whether there is a God, the question for me is what sort of God” (“Laboratories of the Spirit: R. S. Thomas’s Religious Poetry”). This question was posed, as Wynn Thomas also elaborates, by “the accusatory witness not only of human history but also of the history of creation itself” (R. S. Thomas 248). R. S. Thomas puts it like this: “when you think of the noise that goes on when a tiger gets to work on a buffalo, it would just appal me . . . ‘Did he who made the lamb make thee?’ was Blake’s way of stating the problem” (“Interview with Simon Barker” 307). The poet therefore explores competing expressions of the Divine – the “opposed emblems / Of hawk and dove,” as he puts it in “After the Lecture” (NBF 22). The objective is not to re-personify God (since that is the problem) but to defamiliarize and so undelimit His being in the world. At the same time, Thomas questions anthropocentric ideas of nature and God as violent, cruel, or even loving. Such thinking is at the expense of the non-anthropocentric reality, the truth of human connectedness to the world of material process, and the regrounded credibility of religion in a scientific age. Instead, Thomas’s ecocentric focus on the world of his experience and observation reveals the recalcitrant otherness of God and nature to human discernment and delimitation. Ultimately, against the human reasoning which delimits God’s presence in the world, Thomas accepts a “vaster reason,” as he writes in “The Minister” (CP 55), in which both beauty and violence are Divine. Although nature may be, as
Morgan argues, “reflective, in the end, of a Christian God of love,” it appears that Thomas ultimately dispenses with such delimiting notions. It seems more apt to note, as Graham Turner writes, that Thomas “often shies away from the idea of love, human or divine” but manages, nevertheless, to convey God “with great tenderness as well as awe” (“Interview with Graham Turner”).

In this chapter and the next we will see how Thomas uses raptors to grapple with anthropocentric views of God and natural violence which deem nature void of Divine presence. There is the owl that cries “Derision on a God of love” in “The Minister” (CP 42-55), the harrier hawk in “Moorland” (CP 513) that materialises “from nothing” with “claws of fire,” and the sparrowhawk “sharpening its beak for the feast” as a part of God’s terrible “economy” (A 170).

Thomas’s raptors encompass a response to “violent” natural process and an inquiry into that response. In particular Thomas explores the ways that we distance ourselves from natural process and thus from the “wild God of the world.” This quotation from Robinson Jeffers’s poem “Hurt Hawks” (49) is pertinent because, in his interview with Graham Turner, Thomas explains that “I’ve been much influenced . . . by the American poet Robinson Jeffers, who says somewhere, ‘the people who talk of God in human terms, think of that!’” Unable to “conceive” of God like this, and faced with the question of his own relationship with God, Thomas replies that “loving God is too much of a human construct. What there must be is awe.” As W. V. Davis notes, Thomas reflects a philosophical attitude similar to that which Jeffers terms “Inhumanness.” Davis describes this as a “reaction to, or against . . . an unfounded, anthropocentric view of the universe and an anthropomorphic description of the divine” (“The Lame Feet of Salvation” 162).
The shock of birds of prey counters the domestication – and domesticated idea of God – which divides the Divine from the world. This shock “remembers” to us the “wild God of the world” that Jeffers – Thomas’s anchoritic counterpart – accuses “you communal people” of having “forgotten.” In Jeffers’s poem, these people are implicitly isolated from the “wild God” because of their domestication from nature and from their mortality and being-in-the-world. However, “hawks, and men that are dying, remember”; they recall and bring to mind the God that is “Intemperate and savage . . . / Beautiful and wild.” Caught before the indifferent glare of natural process – the “lame feet of salvation” – these beings know a god of extremes, the unknowable God that is the naturalistic process of life and death.

For Jeffers, the hawk physically expresses this wild God and, like dying men, it is close to God in its closeness to the natural process that is itself Divine. However, Thomas’s God is “behind or beyond,” as Davis says, the universe that for Jeffers is “one being, a single organism, one great life that includes all life and all things” (“The Lame Feet of Salvation” 165). In other words, God is not “Life” for Thomas, who is more panentheistic than pantheistic in his Gaian Spirituality. In the end, as the most visible reminder and incarnation of the wild otherness and unknowability of God, raptors inform Thomas’s conception of God as not a being but the creative and destructive force of being-itself. The result is a regrounded, Gaian – in Bron Taylor’s terminology – conception of God as the ground of being, the underlying unity in which the “at once unbearably beautiful and unbearably ferocious,” in M. Wynn Thomas’s words, come together (R. S. Thomas 248).

Thomas embraces the Romantic sublime, in his raptor imagery, for precisely these reasons: to encompass the terrifying beauty of God, and to
uphold a wordless, religious awe before the unknowable. As Bron Taylor argues, the Romantic idea of the sublime is foundational to dark green religion, having “fertilized the ground for so many . . . forms of nature religion in the West” (47). By describing the sublime as a “turn toward the sensuous experience in nature as the key to both secular and sacred knowledge,” Taylor intimates that at the heart of dark green religion we can find the paired movements of secularization and resacralization that, according to Kate Rigby, characterize the regrounding of religion. As we will see, through raptors Thomas engages with the revelation of God at the embodied, sensory level; he turns to the “sensuous” or intuited experience of the Divine as a way of bringing together the sacred and secular, spiritual and material, in a regrounded religious awareness. This regrounding of religion evokes a world that is not simply what we make (of) it but mysterious and sacred, a world in which God reveals Himself in every moment.

The poiesis of birdwatching is closely connected to Thomas’s regrounding of religion and opening-up of ideas of God; it is the occasion – as well as an elaborate metaphor – for Thomas’s religious experience of unity. As discussed, birdwatching evokes a way of looking and being that, as per Kate Rigby’s description of poiesis, “lets things be in their obscure otherness” (“Earth, World, Text” 430). Through raptors Thomas upholds wonder and awe at the Divine; he does not delimit ultimate reality but embraces the self-disclosing of God through the self-disclosing of the natural world. This awe “when facing the complexity and mysteries of life and the universe” is an indicator of dark green religion, as Taylor notes (16), and of the poiesis of birdwatching in action.
Religion and birdwatching came together at the beginning of Thomas’s rural ministry as he wandered the Welsh moorlands, meeting the rough farmers of his congregation and learning “the facts of country life” (A 12). The fewer demands on his time as a rural minister in his early curacies meant that:

there was nothing to do really so I started to take a keen interest in birds. . . . There was no point in visiting country folk by day, as they’d be out in the fields, so I would study in the mornings and go for birdwatching walks in the afternoons. (Gower 75)

On such walks in the surrounding hill-country of his third parish, Manafon, Thomas came face to face with a reality that forced him to confront the wild God. There was the “problem of pain” (A 43) and suffering, and how to reconcile that with the God of love. The sometimes lovely, often harsh environment resisted Thomas’s initial pastoral expectations and opened him to its true nature, and thus the true nature of its God.

In “The Minister” (CP 42-55), Thomas’s non-autobiographical (but nevertheless informative) verse drama, which dramatizes the problems that faced a Protestant minister in the Welsh hill-country, we read of

the land where men labour
In silence, and the rusted harrow
Breaks its teeth on the grey stones.
Below, the valleys are an open book,
Bound in sunlight; but the green tale
Told in its pages is not true.
The bleak landscape is far from an Edenic place of spiritual promise. Its pastoral “tale” is untrue, sickly and unripe like the “green hay / And greener corn” of the springs that are always late. There is also “the ancestral fury of the rain / Spitting and clawing at the pane” like a wild animal, and the minister who looks out on that “grey world, grey with despair.” In the chapel, religious platitudes are opposed by the aggressively irreligious elements:

‘Beloved, let us love one another,’ the words are blown
To pieces by an unchristened wind
In the chapel rafters, and love’s text
Is riddled by the inhuman cry
Of buzzards circling above the moor.

Nature shrieks against the minister’s “creed,” as in Tennyson’s famous lines from In Memoriam – a connection which S. J. Perry has noted (Chameleon Poet 111). Finally, when the Reverend Morgan preaches one night, an owl cries “Derision on a God of love.” Thus, the association of raptors with the wild God of the moor begins.

“The Airy Tomb” (CP 17-20) also pictures this naturalistic moorland world where life and death meet, unadorned, “in the circle of a buzzard’s flight / Round the blue axle of heaven.” The poem enacts its speaker’s struggle to maintain, in the story of Twm the farmer, a spiritual romance in the face of an oppressive material reality. The beauty and hostility of the hill farms exist in tension in the speaker’s mind, complicating his project. Rooks write “poems” in the sky and in spring, when the world seems resurrected, the robin weaves “a sweet tale of love,” yet the naïve speaker is hard-pressed to reconcile all this with the “festering” of “flesh and bone.” There is also the ominous “shrill, far cry / Of circling buzzard,” the “hawk floating in a bubbling pool,” and “sheep
rotting in the wind and sun.” Accordingly, the speaker becomes increasingly defensive of his anti-romantic romance until his attempts to redeem Twm’s existence fail, reinforcing how the moor resists – shrieks against – the poet’s creed and credibility. The poem reflects the otherness of nature to anthropocentric organizing and moralizing. The speaker’s distance from the bare truth of Twm’s life on the hill-farms evokes Thomas’s awareness of the vaster reason and wild foundations that cannot be tamed or minimized.

Thomas’s parishioners were far from the “cultivated rural ‘gwerin’ (‘volk’)” (M. Wynn Thomas, “Keeping His Pen Clean” 64) that Thomas had expected – those who in living close to nature were meant to lead exemplary spiritual lives. Rather, their lives made Thomas rethink the God that he had imagined would be unequivocally present and accessible in this agrarian world. The “little bourgeois” with “the mark of the church and library” upon him, as Thomas writes of himself (A 11), was brought up close against an unromantic reality. “I now found myself amongst tough, materialistic, hard-working people,” he writes (A 11), whose “only interests were the farm, the animals, [and] the prices” (A 53). In their world there was no time for sentimental or spiritual indulgences: “[i]f a lamb died, there was nothing for it but to fling it into a hedge for the crows to eat their fill” (A 12). On Sundays, “an assembly of people would come together . . . to hear the young rector tell of a world that existed only in his imagination” (A 53). These people measured “truth according to the moor’s / Pitiless commentary and the wind’s veto” (“The Minister”).

Thus, Thomas came to explore these contradictions to his creed. The God of his pastoral (pun intended) imagination had little credibility here, and this necessitated understanding the wild God of the moor in order to re-
envision the nature and presence of God. The harsh landscape posed the question of spiritual desolation yet, in poems like “The Moor” (CP 166), a deeper presence nevertheless made itself “felt.” In “The Minister,” the narrator declares that “God is in the throat of a bird” and “Wales . . . is His peculiar home” – but which bird? The owl? The thrush that later troubles Morgan’s ascetic “mind / With strange theories, pagan but sweet”? The narrator intimates a “peculiar” intertwining of the spiritual and material in “the untamed land.” This is “[t]he marginal land where flesh meets spirit / Only on Sundays,” he explains, the line-break balancing certainty with scepticism. Routine, out-of-touch religious practices obfuscate – amidst the inescapable physicality of the moor and the materialism that overwhelms matters of the spirit – the literal sense in which this unity is true.

“The Minister” offers insight into these tensions between religion and nature. Like the Reverend Morgan, Thomas had to negotiate between his theological training and the stark, un-theoretical realities of the “bare moor.” In many respects Thomas found himself unprepared for rural ministry. In Manafon, he explains,

I was brought up hard against this community. . . . And I must say that I found nothing that I’d been told in theological college was of any help at all in these circumstances. It was just up to me to find my own way. (Ormond 49).

As a cautionary tale, “The Minister” evokes Thomas’s engagement with these tensions and his endeavour to understand the material foundations of his spirituality. Rather than talking about “souls or immortality or the good life,” he sought to connect with his parishioners’ views so as to understand how their lives were “part of the order of things” (Ormond 50). Meanwhile, in
poems like “Affinity” and “Iago Prytherch” he pondered the authentic spirituality of these farmers living amidst the “muck and blood and hardness, the rain and the spittle and the phlegm of farm life” (Ormond 49).

Reverend Morgan fails, however, to accept the wild God of the moor and reconcile the spiritual with the material and materialistic foundations of life in the hill-country. The idea of the “God of love” makes the hill-country seem especially destitute, spiritually; regardless of the moor’s mood, Morgan’s religious education excludes God from nature. Morgan is therefore unwilling and unable to reconcile God with the world outside his study window. The disconnection of his domesticated, academic life represents a disconnection from the ground of his being. In retrospect, Morgan comes to realize his inadequate and limited knowledge of the God who seems “at strife,” in Tennyson’s words, with nature’s “secret meaning” (78):

I wore a black coat, being fresh from college,
With striped trousers, and, indeed, my knowledge
Would have been complete, had it included
The bare moor, where nature brooded
Over her old, inscrutable secret.
But I didn’t even know the names
Of the birds and the flowers by which one gets
A little closer to nature’s heart. (“The Minister,” CP 46)

Morgan’s focus on the ironically-chiming “knowledge” of the “college,” with its detached focus on the spiritual, separates him from the world of his parishioners and from finding God in their world. He lacks even a sentimental interest in nature that would bring him closer to its “heart” – that is, the core
and essence of the material world, Wordsworth’s “central peace” (*The Complete Poetical Works* 187).

Morgan’s failures make “The Minister” an argument for opening up ideas of God and nature and regrounding religion in order to become acquainted with the wild God and ground of one’s being. Morgan’s refusal to examine the material foundations of the moor as an expression of God that is not remote but the basis of his parishioners’ lives – as well as his own – makes him an ineffective parody of St. Francis. Instead of preaching of and to the natural world, he expounds “the Word / To the flies and spiders as Francis preached to the birds.” The way that “the Word” is separated by the line-break yet connected to the “birds” by rhyme re-emphasizes Morgan’s problem.

Indeed, this rhyme again links Divine revelation and communication to birds. Morgan specifically ignores the feathered creatures that offer to redeem the hill-country’s bleak materialistic existence. When a thrush repeatedly takes its “pulpit” outside Morgan’s study, troubling his young mind

> With strange theories, pagan but sweet,
> That made the Book’s black letters dance
> To a tune John Calvin never heard[,]\n
the minister turns from it as from another carnal “temptation.” Morgan’s religion prevents him from finding God in even the most amenable situations. He is thus unable to appreciate the material foundations of his spirituality and therefore unable to be at home in his material being and body, exclusively focused as he is on the spiritual.

Thus the moor becomes insurmountable as Morgan fights “[w]ith that which yields to nothing human” – something which informed Thomas’s re-
education to the moor and to the nature of God. The narrator foregrounds the reality against which Morgan should have measured truth:

We will listen instead to the wind’s text
Blown through the roof, or the thrush’s song
In the thick bush that proved [Morgan] wrong,
Wrong from the start, for nature’s truth
Is primary and her changing seasons
Correct out of a vaster reason
The vague errors of the flesh.

However inscrutable, the natural order is ultimately redemptive and sacramental. Morgan, though, fixates on his parishioners’ materialism – in light of his religious asceticism – rather than on the wider environmental context of his spirituality. As such, he neglects a “dark green” spiritual appreciation of the earth as the “incarnation of spirit” (Thomas, “A Thicket in Lleyn” 101). The poem’s narrator suggests that “nature’s truth” is fundamental and that it resolves Morgan’s “vague” and obscure focus on the carnality of “the flesh” within the greater context of one’s being-in-the-world. Embracing this and what it entails is, for Thomas, a spiritual, unifying act since God is the ground of one’s being, that in which all things have their origin. Nature’s “vaster reason” also exceeds, pointedly, the delimiting human reason that, for Morgan, excludes the Divine from the natural world. This “vaster reason” lies in nature’s “changing seasons,” which comprise the complexity and ambiguity of Morgan’s spiritual and material experience on the moor.

Morgan’s restrictive Protestantism therefore prevents him from accepting the thrush’s sermon. His “cramped cell / Of thought” cuts him off from the moor and thus from the unity of being. His Protestant focus on the
material world only in regard to the materialism it encourages ignores the “vaster reason.” Morgan therefore becomes disheartened by the wilderness and his inability to speak to his people.

Ultimately, the division of spiritual and material extends to his own being as a “castration” that the narrator condemns:

Protestantism – the adroit castrator
Of art; the bitter negation
Of song and dance and the heart’s innocent joy –
You have botched our flesh and left us only the soul’s Terrible impotence in a warm world.

Morgan’s religion is self-negating and therefore self-destructive. The consequences of material and spiritual division are thus played out on his body. Unable to hear the “hills’ / Music calling to the hushed / Music within,” Morgan finds no consonance between himself and nature because he finds no consonance between God and nature. He shuts out the softer moods of the moor – the sunlight, the thrush, the curlews “piping . . . spring’s cadenza” – except where they encourage a distanced inclination towards the pathetic fallacy. Instead, Morgan lets “his mind / Fester with brooding on the sly / Infirmities of the hill people,” and thus “[t]he pus conspired with the old / Infection lurking in his breast.” He becomes the bird that he finds “dead, starved” in the manse one day, reflecting that “[t]here is always the thin pane of glass set up between us / And our desires.”

**Natural Violence**
As we have seen, recognizing our being-in-the-world is the key to unity for Thomas. In poems like “Affinity” or “The Parish,” the farmer’s stark experience of this, and thus of sacramental unity in the natural world, distinguishes him from the “refined, / But affected, sense” of his cultured onlookers (“A Peasant,” CP 4). The tension, then, is between an embodied sense of being-in-the-world and the affected “shock” of this to one’s prim sensibility, which then denies one’s being-in-the-world and God’s compatibility with this world. In Morgan’s case, this disconnectedness prevents him from becoming reconciled with the material foundations of his spirituality. His disconnection from the Divine in nature, and thus his embodied being-in-the-world, is then framed as a kind of castration. Thus, understanding the presence of God in nature, and coming to terms with one’s being-in-the-world, require reframing the violence and harshness of that being.

The natural violence that Thomas observed presented problems for reconciling the material and spiritual. The indifferent harshness of “Nature, red in tooth and claw” reflected the troubling material and biological processes of Life: how were they to be reconciled with God since, as we saw in the previous chapter, Life itself is not God? Furthermore, how was this violence to be reconciled with the God of love? In the hill-country, reality was reduced to an almost entirely biological process while, in a world preoccupied with post-Darwinian naturalism, the deeper unity of being and the presence of God could not be readily inferred.

In a passage from No-one, Thomas wrestles with these questions, searching for a way to unite the beautiful and violent within the Divine and its “unbroken chain of being” (A 78). This meant embracing the entirety of that
unity with the world, both the external beauty and the internal horrors by which it was sustained. Thomas writes:

there are two aspects to the sea, the external and the internal. Or, if you like, it is both a mirror and a window. In the mirror is to be seen all the beauty and glory of the creation: the colours and the images of the clouds, with the birds going past on their eternal journey. But on using it as a window, an endless war is to be seen, one creature mercilessly and continuously devouring another. . . . there are thousands of horrors, as if they were the creator’s failed experiments. And through the seaweed, as if through a forest, the seals and the cormorants and the mackerel hunt like rapacious wolves. What kind of God created such a world? A God of love? (A 78)

The brutality of natural process held terrifying implications for the nature of God and the human connection to Him, that unbroken being. “It isn’t only animals that are prey to the ruinous forces in life,” Thomas notes. “People, too, are prone to being tortured by bacteria so small as to be invisible” (A 79), he continues, remembering Schubert and Keats. Thomas’s “chain of being” is not hierarchical; such connection to nature is important to “understanding” God and the unity of being. The implicit perversity that ordains that such “great genius” should “fall prey to forms so low down the chain of being” hints at His ultimate unknowability and critiques the medieval hierarchical worldview. There is no accounting for the Divine reason behind the economy of God, only a vaster reason that has its source in something beyond human comprehension. “Face to face with a mystery as awful as this, how can anyone be absolutely certain” about God, Thomas asks. “That was
Job’s problem, mute before his God. That was Blake’s question, ‘How do you know?’ If a mortal being such as man could comprehend God, what kind of God would that be?” (A 79). Thus, it is from these early experiences that Thomas’s mature, critical contemplation of the natural world and its spiritual dimensions flow.

In light of this harsh economy, Thomas suggests that we need different myths through which to understand this world and the God behind it. Myth is where culture, nature, religion, and language come together. It is the “human attempt to struggle with ultimate mystery in a narrative form,” as the ecological philosopher Max Oelschlaeger writes (10). The “relentless demythologizing” of Western culture, he reminds us (54), is closely connected to the forgetting of our wild roots and subsequently the loss of the wild. The myth stands as a narrative once believed to be true. It had offered an explanation of the supernatural which subsequently established customs and rules founded upon reverence and respect for the natural world as sacred or inspired. But due to the contemporary “cognitive hegemony” (19) of applied science, the idea that nature is more than mechanistic process – especially given its dissonance with traditional ideas about God – has become “incomprehensible.” Accordingly, we have forgotten the uncomfortable truth of our place within the natural world – as prey to its lowest life forms – and what is for Thomas the unity of the spiritual and material.

Thomas’s experiment with the mythic mode in his collection H’m – which has often been likened to Ted Hughes’s Crow – frames the poem “Rough” (CP 286) as an attempt to remythologize a world in which anthropomorphic conceptions of God contradict the natural reality and delimit His presence. “Rough” critiques the creation story, depicting a
capricious, sadistic, and unfamiliar God that makes sense in this world by not making sense – that is, by not being determinable by human reason. Thomas answers the mechanistic worldview with the God of a “self-regulating machine,” exploring the nature of God in light of the natural economy, not in opposition to it. His alternative myth confronts the reality of natural violence and the human place in it, the avoidance of which domesticates us from the wild God of the world. The poem is part of Thomas’s attempt to renew the eco-spiritual awareness that is fundamental to unity of being, and to write against the demythologization of Western culture in a scientific and mechanistic age.

In the poem, God beholds a creation in which the natural cycle is implicit yet unfulfilled. No creature has yet committed the violent act, and there is a nursery rhyme innocence reminiscent, as Elaine Shepherd notes, of “This is the house that Jack built” (95). God also, at first, seems like a “fairytale giant” who, if not benevolent, is at least benign. The poem begins:

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.

Although there is as yet no violence, the almost-pastoral repose is subsequently shattered in a single line. God’s standard of perfection forces the reader to question what kind of God validates this existence, as well as the anthropocentric reaction to what seems perverse and imperfect:

He stepped back;
it was perfect, a self-regulating machine
of blood and faeces.
By whose standards can we judge this reality, the poem seems to ask. Is there a way to see natural violence as “perfect”?

The idea of nature as a “self-regulating machine,” with a God behind it, also challenges mechanistic reductionism. The poem importantly turns the mechanistic metaphor into the sign of a God who is otherwise not familiar to the anthropocentric thinking that deduces a mechanistic reality or distances God from His creation. God steps back to praise His creation but adds one final touch that identifies Him with His visceral system:

One thing was missing:

he skimmed off a faint reflection of himself
in sea-water, breathed air into it,
and set the red corpuscles whirling. It was not long
before the creature had the eagle, the wolf and
the jack-rabbit squealing for mercy.

“[C]orpuscles” and “whirling” extend the sense of a mechanistic, machinelike existence – one that is nevertheless set in motion by God. Thomas implies the involvement of the spiritual with the corporeal (that is, matter at the deepest level) – an interaction that is at the heart of the poem’s enquiry. The shocking unfamiliarity of God, according to the natural world, ironically makes unity conceivable where anthropomorphic ideas of God would delimit His being and presence. God’s inscrutability, and the way in which He steps back from the material creation, having set it somewhat arbitrarily in motion – as though without a Divine plan – also destabilize the notion of an anthropomorphic being in charge of the control panel. This intimates Thomas’s Gaian Spirituality: God is not Life but He is involved with how it plays out, as the poem’s opening especially suggests.
God’s reasons for creating this kind of order grow more vexing as He brings Man into the equation. The reader finds himself wondering about the nature of God and the true sense in which the “creature” – Man – is a “reflection” of Him. If we are like God in our oppressive power, is this the natural order of a perverse God? Is this vicious cycle all that God’s economy amounts to? As God sets “the creature” at the top of this “self-regulating machine,” the reader is forced to rethink even further the nature of God:

[. . .] God took a handful of small germs,
sowing them in the smooth flesh [of the creature]. It was curious,
the harvest: limbs modelled an obscene question, the head swelled, out of the eyes came tears of pus. There was the sound
of thunder, the loud, uncontrollable laughter of God, and in his side like an incurred stitch, Jesus.

This sadistic deity introduces viruses and bacteria like some perverse gardener or Frankenstein, experimenting for no reason other than to see what happens. The “harvest” is simply “curious” – not appalling, just an interesting deviation. The offensive result poses a question: why? What kind of god would ordain this? Here it is, as Shepherd writes, an “Olympian god . . . whose playthings are mortals . . . [a] creator who is distanced from, or indifferent to, his creation” (97). Jesus is not the evidence of Divine compassion but rather “involuntarily ‘incurred’” as “the product of God’s laughter.” He is inseparable from the pain and, as Shepherd says, “[i]n some way . . . the inevitable consequence” – or perhaps our mythic response to that pain and suffering.
The layers of meaning are complex, but in this etiological twist—reminiscent of the Greek goddess Athene springing from Zeus’s forehead—“Rough” seems to explain why and how renewal, love, and beauty unavoidably follow from the destructive foundations of life. Perhaps this explains, from within the poem’s alternative cosmology, the presence of suffering and its redemption in the world. “Rough” accounts for the God reflected by a world predicated on violence, but Jesus—God’s counterbalance—accounts for the implicit other side to this ontology as that through which such an existence is redeemed. The new myth, perhaps, frames God and Jesus as personifications which make up, and explain, the nature of existence and unity of being. The final line, for instance, positions “God” and “Jesus” as opposing yet inseparable parts— or the beginning and/or the end—of this ontology. Thus God “incur[s]” Jesus as the natural, ineluctable result born of pain and suffering and destined to endure the same. God has no control over this, as though it— and the ultimate life, rather than destruction, that Jesus implicitly represents—is all part of His being. God, then, holds Jesus within Himself; from pain and suffering also comes redemption and life. In this way, Thomas offers a means to understand these antinomies within the being of God. There is also a hint of the sacramental, sacred unity, and thus of the spiritual and material.

In the poem, Thomas’s commitment to poiesis—that is, seeing without romanticism or anthropocentrism—translates into what Shepherd calls an “objective appraisal of the world as we know it” (94). “[I]n the book I read: / God is love,” explains the speaker in “Which” (CP 297), but upon “lifting” his head and observing the story of natural selection, he does not “find it / so.” Thus, in “Rough” Thomas contemplates how coming to terms with God means
facing up to the Divine order – the God that the book of nature reveals. Contrary to those ideas about God that are divorced from reality and thereby divorce Him from the natural world, Thomas presents a God that is acutely and problematically entwined with His creation. “Rough” bridges what Shepherd calls “the gap between lived experience and spiritual perception,” offering the opportunity to reground religion.

“Rough” seems drawn from the pages of Guy Mountfort’s Portrait of a Wilderness – Thomas’s inspiration for his own expedition to the Coto Doñana’s stark natural reality – in its style and interest in the role of man within the natural cycle. Here is Mountfort:

Natural enemies, of course, abounded [on the Coto], for all nature subsists on predation . . . . In the space of only a few hours had I not just witnessed four progressive stages of predation – the eagle which attacked the Bee-eater, which preyed on the dragonfly, which preyed on the midge, which sucked the life-blood of the bog plants? It was like the nursery rhyme of the house that Jack built. Even the lordly Imperial Eagle was not immune, for its numbers were held in check by man . . . Only modern man contrived to upset the ecological balance of nature; man the destroyer, who now killed not for survival but for pleasure; man the despoiler[.] (149)

In “Rough” Thomas appears to turn the same experience into precisely the naturalistic nursery-rhyme that should be taken to heart, accepted into our understanding of God and nature, and noted for how Man acts out of balance with the Divine law. This last notion, moreover, is perhaps attributed to Man’s ignorance of that economy as functioning according to a vaster “intricate and
complex” order than the merely material process that is deduced according to human reason (A 170). The way that modern man kills “not for survival but for pleasure” evokes how he acts outside of the natural order. This is something which the poem suggests, in its ironic retake on the idea that Man is formed in God’s image, arises from the reverse anthropomorphism of such dogma. The ideas of God against which the poem responds – and which are therefore seen in relief – rest on disconnected ideas about ourselves drawn from “modern” distinctions between the natural law and the Divine. Our disunity with nature is both the consequence and continued cause of our ideas about God and nature.

By shaking up ingrained ideas about God, the poem makes the reader evaluate his openness to the self-disclosing of nature and God, from which those ideas distance him. Our myths are a reflection of our society, so what does it say about us that this myth is so shocking and confronting? How much have we domesticated and distanced ourselves from the God of the wild? “Rough” is shocking precisely because of how far we are from nature and its wild God – which is, ultimately, the poem’s lesson. “Rough” therefore reflects on our mythic relationship with the world. The poem is a mature variation of the romantic myths or nursery rhymes that we have grown out of, and out of which have grown our problematic interactions with the natural world. However, the purpose of “Rough” is not so much to say that this God is or may be God – Thomas, after all, emphasizes otherness and unknowability – but to challenge unquestioned ideas about God. “We need to remind ourselves,” writes Shepherd, “of Thomas’s admission that it is ‘not God I am tilting at, but ideas of God’ . . . it is the perceived image of God, and its informing logic, which is always being challenged” (94).
The way that “Rough” dramatically re-envisions God – working back from Jesus to God, from suffering and pain to the kind of God that could set it in motion – ultimately re-envisions our status within nature. The God of H’m is a “parody,” as Tony Brown explains, “of the god that humankind has created in its own image” (R. S. Thomas 75). Accordingly, in “Rough” this God challenges our anthropomorphism, providing a confronting vision of man and his place in nature according to the defamiliarized image of God revealed through His creation. In other words, the poem offers an alternative, un-anthropocentric picture of how humankind is formed in God’s image in such a way as does not divide us from the rest of nature – like traditional interpretations of this idea – but makes us all too humbly aware of our place in it. In the poem man is merely a “faint reflection” of God – and seemingly only in his propensity for violence. This places man within, not above, God’s violent natural order, contrary to assumptions based on the anthropocentric myths against which the poem is written. Moreover, as the poem addresses those myths, and perhaps the idea of human dominance over nature that they inculcate, it reframes (and checks) man’s power not as a sign of his exceptionalism but of his connection to the bloody cycle ordained by a different God – a cycle from which he is not immune. The introduction of the “small germs” that subdue man, mockingly reminding us of our inescapable involvement in this material process, reinforce this. God creates Man only to undermine his power over nature; man is humbled and overpowered by the smallest of organisms, making him irrefutably part of the “self-regulating machine.” The poem therefore offers its alternative myth not so much as an explanation of natural violence but as an objection to ideas about God which ignore this predatory reality and may also account for the way that man puts
nature underfoot. God’s shocking otherness and unfamiliarity reminds us not that we are separate from nature but that we are an “inconsequential” part of it – indeed, the poem only refers to us as another “creature.” The outcome of not anthropomorphizing God, then, is a myth that acquaints us with our own materiality. In addition, this new image of ourselves that emerges alongside a new image of God suggests that by confronting the natural order we will discover the god of the wild.

Reflecting on his time in Manafon, Thomas further reveals his struggle to connect God with the natural world. In another passage from his Autobiographies, raptors evoke the wild God, presenting Thomas’s problem of reconciling beauty and violence within the Divine order:

The young rector would himself see the birds of prey hunting, and the weasel and the stoat going about their bloody work. And how beautiful those birds are, and how agile the small animals hunt. Anyone who has seen a peregrine falcon falling like lightning on its prey is sure to experience a certain thrill that makes him feel quite humble. These are the masters of the world of nature. One of the unfailing rules of that world is that life has to die in the cause of life. If there is any other way on this earth, God has not seen fit to follow it. This is a doctrine that plays straight into the hands of the strong. As far as this world is concerned, Isaiah’s vision of the wolf dwelling with the lamb, and the leopard lying down with the kid, is a myth. The economy doesn’t work like that. (A 95-96)

Here the natural economy is disturbing yet nevertheless sublime, thrilling, and humbling. The predators and “masters of . . . nature” acquaint Thomas
with the wild God and the foundations of life – the Divine law within which he is included. Such scenes contextualize how Thomas opens up the being of God as that which incorporates the beautiful and violent, both of which are crucial to reconciling the spiritual and material.

As we have already touched upon, the Romantic idea of the sublime helped Thomas conceptualize the wild God who is not a being but the creative and destructive force behind the universe. The concept of the sublime – as embodied by raptors like the peregrine – offered a means for expressing the simultaneous grace and brutality of God as the ground of being, and thus a means to reconcile the material and spiritual. For Thomas, raptors convey the awe-inspiring majesty of this God that lies beyond human comprehension yet is intuited in sensuous experiences of the “imponderable.” As a sensuous experience, the sublime also provided a way to convey the otherness of God to human rationality or limitation, expressing instead an embodied sense of Him that went hand-in-hand with Thomas’s Gaian Spirituality.

“Moorland” (CP 513) reflects how the Divine is, for Thomas, conveyed through and expressed by the natural world. The harrier evokes the sublime, elemental presence of God as the ground of being – that which holds in balance and encompasses the wild beauty of the natural world:

    the harrier occurs,
    materialising from nothing, snow –

    soft, but with claws of fire,
    quartering the bare earth
    for the prey that escapes it;
hovering over the incipient
scream, here a moment, then
not here, like my belief in God.
The hawk’s fusion of violent power and beauty seems to convey for the speaker the inhuman and vast unknowableness of God; its frightening appearance (and disappearance) coincides with the speaker’s suddenly wavering “belief” in a conventional God. The hawk materializes *ex nihilo* quietly, lightly, and softly as snow, yet it is simultaneously sharp, loud, and ferocious. Thomas suggests that these qualities are not irreconcilable within the raptor, which also unites the four classical elements. The sublime becomes a way of understanding the being of God as that which incorporates the terrifying and amazing. Thus the hawk becomes a sublime manifestation and image of Divine presence. However, in accordance with Thomas’s nature mysticism, God is not singled out or explicitly linked to the hawk; rather, His presence and nature are implicitly felt and intuited in the hawk’s captivating being. As Thomas puts it in his earlier poem “The Moor,” “[w]hat God was there made himself felt” (*CP* 166).

**Nature’s Vaster Reason**

In order to come to terms with the wild God, Thomas suggests that anthropocentric ideas about nature must also be examined. Part of this means rethinking our response to the undomesticated world. For Thomas, the natural world is often horrifyingly indifferent to its system of “blood and faeces” (*CP* 286). However, the value of this sentimental response is questionable: not only is it anthropocentric but it preserves an intellectual,
moral, and aesthetic distance from one’s material being, and thus from the
unity of being that is God.

In “A Peasant” (CP 4) and “Affinity” (CP 8) the “refined” implied
audience has to be reminded that the farmer “also is human” (CP 8) despite –
or rather because of – his offensive “stark naturalness” (CP 4), “[g]aitered
with mud, lost in his own breath” (CP 8). It is as though the farmer’s
belonging to the crude world of nature negates his humanity while his
onlookers consider themselves separate from these natural foundations. Their
humanity is, however, not incompatible with his. Rather, in “Affinity,” the
farmer is connected to the ground of being – to the sacred – in his connection
to the material foundations of his being. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter
Two, the farmer’s materialistic poverty is, perhaps in a Taoist kind of way, his
wealth: his capacity to be (ful)filled in a different way and have the “world for
church.” Ultimately, the farmer’s closeness to nature represents ours; by
declaring the wild farmer human, Thomas declares the human essentially
wild. Iago Prytherch, too, is our “prototype,” the timeless reminder –
“Enduring like a tree” – of our connection to the earth (CP 4). Because of his
closeness to nature the farmer’s name “also is written in the Book of Life” (CP
8). This suggests that his and our spiritual being is rooted in the material
world, as the farmer – who worships and listens to “God’s choir / Scatter their
praises” in “the woods’ wide porch” – knows and demonstrates.

The violence of nature also poses problems for realizing how nature is
“big with presence,” in Christopher Morgan’s words (76). Such
anthropocentric issues with nature, which conflict with anthropocentric ideas
about God, require re-evaluation. The wild otherness of the raptor God, we
will see, synthesizes Thomas’s bifocal approach. Through raptors he evaluates
ideas about nature and ideas about God that interrupt unity. The wildness
signified by raptors and the “sharp tooth tearing its prey” (“The Parish,” CP
101) is about confronting, articulating, and accepting the otherness of God to
human rationality according to the otherness of nature – which then shares in
the resulting poiesis. Thomas acknowledges “nature as not merely sublime in
its aspect or nurturing in its action, but equally as fierce in its tumult,”
ruthlessness, deadliness, and harsh “discompassion” (Morgan 51). The result
is the “recognition that nature must be accepted on its own harsher terms”
and that “suddenly surprising . . . expressions of nature not as tamed . . . but
as harbouring equally a wildness, [and] fierceness . . . [can] be freeing as a
recognition of beauty which has its source and logic in powers beyond human
reason.” In particular, Thomas calls his readers to accept and explore, as in
“The Minister,” “nature’s truth” and “vaster reason” (CP 55) in order to
reconceptualise Divinity. By doing so, the unity of being need not be
unravelled. Through birds of prey, Thomas contemplates the vaster reason
within which the violence in nature can be understood as Divine.

In A Year in Llŷn, for instance, Thomas writes:

I heard a sparrowhawk mewing in the wood at Ty’n Parc, as if it
were sharpening its beak for the feast that will come its way in
the new year. This is how it was before man appeared here. That
is nature. Is that God’s economy? Life depends on the ability to
obtain sufficient sustenance. The weak go to oblivion. In some
ways, and at times, it is quite terrifying. Couldn’t God have done
better than to make the earth some giant mouth which devours,
devours unceasingly in order to sustain itself? (A 170).
But this questioning leads Thomas to an acceptance of the vaster reason that does not put God to the question – an insubordination that, in its conclusions, is often linked to ecological recklessness. The violence embodied by the sparrowhawk and peregrine is reconciled within a vaster reason:

Sometimes the creation frightens us, and yet, on reflection, it is amazingly intricate and complex. And on the whole it isn’t nature but man that kicks over the traces. For millions of years, despite the killing and the devouring, the earth has kept the balance, and it is only in our period of history, and specifically towards the close of the present century, that we have started to see how man in his blindness and greed is endangering the earth’s future. (A 170)

The wild otherness of nature to human reason disrupts human explication – and limitation – of this world and its God. Thomas also suggests that accepting this economy is important for understanding our being in the natural world, rather than maintaining a sentimental distance from it and the unity of being. Indeed, it is Man who acts outside of this intricate natural balance and Divine order. Thus Thomas turns to an acceptance of the “delicately counterpoised,” as Guy Mountfort writes of the Coto Doñana, “balance between the weak and the strong” (149).

This notion of an “intricate and complex” economy resists the chaos/order dualism which interrupts our sense of being-in-the-world. In “The Parish,” as we will see, this is hypocritical and ignorant, perpetuating the idea of human separateness. As the American eco-philosopher Gary Snyder writes, “there is an almost self-congratulatory ignorance of the natural world that is pervasive in Euro-American business, political, and religious circles.”
However, “Nature is orderly. That which appears to be chaotic in nature is only a more complex kind of order” (93). The real threat, Snyder continues, is “not nature-as-chaos . . . but the State’s presumption that it has created order.” To designate everything outside of that order as wild, to define “wild” by “what – from a human standpoint – it is not,” means it “cannot be seen . . . for what it is” (9): the foundation. Understanding this wild order is crucial to Thomas and his Gaian Spirituality, according to which he registers ultimate reality.

In an unpublished and unnamed poem that begins “Whose diet is dust and moonlight” (Prey 26), Thomas contemplates the vaster reason behind the world’s endless consumption. The speaker’s view of the night sky is disturbed by “a great storm of bodies, / snow-winged but lost in the darkness.” Moths and insects “arrive from nowhere,” like the harrier in “Moorland,” whispering their “breathless messages / in the language of the dead.” Among them, “bat and barn owl, shadowy / reapers” are seen “playing each of them its small blade.” In this spectral dance of death the speaker wonders

To what end . . .

this dense surplus of forms,

overflowing life’s brimmed cup . . . [?]

What is the purpose or meaning? What is the final end? Whose diet – beyond this “storm of bodies,” the poem seems to ask – is so utterly exhaustive and wasteful, yet wasteless? The first line is both question and answer.

The speaker finds this existence disturbing and sadistic. The raptor and bat “play” as they ply their blades upon the soft, “snow-winged” bodies. Moreover, the grammar of this particular line suggests that this is Life’s double-edged blade, with “its” referring to the predators as “reapers” but
perhaps also life’s great devourer. Subsequently, “surplus” and “overflowing” intimate waste and pointlessness in “the economy of the God of love” (A 107) while, in the image of the “brimmed” cup, the speaker seems to object to notions that there is “more” to life: life’s cup is already overfull. Thus there is scepticism and grim irony regarding the idea of eternity offered in the twenty-third Psalm with its cup that “runneth over.” Instead, the speaker contemplates an unsettling generosity, a cold-blooded economy, and an alienating provision. Thomas juxtaposes the eternal overflowing cup with “life’s brimmed cup” and the sacramental wine with the materiality and mortality of blood and death as the foundation of life. “[B]rimmed” also echoes “Aim” (CP 527) in which Thomas further contemplates the spiritual foundations and explanations behind this stark materiality. In that poem a “stoat sips / at the brimmed rabbit” as a voice cries “The pain, the beauty – Why, why, why? [’].”

Yet the speaker seems to submit to the vaster reason for, in response to his question

There was no answer other
than the sound that life makes
feeding on life, together
with the thought that life’s God
is being itself deplorer of the antinomies
of existence, while letting them occur.

The speaker’s answer is “no answer” and “no answer other / than” the inhuman, indifferent continuation of natural process. In other words there is no answer, except insofar as the lack of an answer and that indifference is the
answer. But despite the poem’s vexed tone this fosters negative capability: ultimate reality discloses itself as not conforming to human reason.

“[L]ife’s God,” it seems, is answerable only to itself, deplores yet simultaneously allowing the “antinomies / of existence”: it exists within the paradox. This speaks to Christopher Morgan’s acknowledgement that while nature ultimately reflects a God of love for Thomas, there is no “alleviation of suffering” (76), only the vaster reason in which that “love” may find expression. The theological “problem of pain” entails that while God “presses in on humanity” through nature it is the otherness of God, according to the otherness of nature, that is impressed upon us. “Whose diet” suggests that God is both pitying and merciless, a paradox which intimates that He is not reducible to anthropomorphic “antinomies.” The phrase “life’s God” also suggests that these antinomies occur independently of the Divine, and that He is only involved insofar as He allows them to be. Life is not God, nor is God directly identifiable with these material processes. Rather, God’s agency lies in His inaction, so that Thomas reframes the idea of God as a being or agent who personally orders this existence. God is rather “being itself,” the underlying order and agency within which these things occur. Thus Thomas avoids the idea of secondary causation as well, since this would still cling to ideas of a remote, explicable being. The way that God deplores and allows these things suggests that He cannot be accounted for by human reason, and that He is somehow both compassionate and indifferent – like nature – and acting according to His being as “being-itself.” This God is close to Jeffers’s wild God. The poem opens up the being of God so that the reality is, as Morgan says, “not that nature is void of presence” but that that presence “while seemingly capable, ‘feels no pity’ and ‘can give no healing’” (76).
Thus the speaker comes to accept that “no answer” is his answer, just as God often replies with silence in the poetry. God is that “being” whose eye “[s]ets tearless” on the beauty and pain in “Life,” the “way the world / Digests itself,” and the “Viruses [that] invade the blood” in “Because” (CP 153). However, God also finds “the dark / . . . [as] dear . . . as the light.” He deplores and allows all these things as that being that is not a being, that great Nothing which encompasses Life. Thus, in “Amen” (CP 160), though the “cold landscape” returns his “stare,” the speaker has to “accept” the being-there of God as “Nothing denie[s]” His presence. The pun is intended: the double meaning of “Nothing” re-emphasizes Thomas’s philosophical dilemma, reflecting the tensions in his mind. “Nothing” denies the presence of God as a being, but “Nothing” therefore denies His presence as being-itself. If we do not know who or what God is, but see Him as based on an inscrutable natural order, then by the same token nothing can deny His presence.

“Whose diet” seems to evoke this kind of unity. Life feeds on life “together,” and the placement of this word suggests not only natural unity but that this “feeding” coincides with the speaker’s revelation that God is the greater unity. In this way “life’s God / is being itself” – that is, playing itself out, free of justification or explanation. Thus, the speaker seems to accept this “no answer” – however disconcertingly – and, as we have seen, such poietic acceptance is for God to “come, unannounced, / remarkable merely for the absence,” as in “Suddenly” (CP 283). In that poem, truth “quietly emerge[s]” as one beholds God “with the whole / of my being, overflowing with him as a chalice would / with the sea.” This is where Thomas’s contemplations of “life’s brimmed cup” lead. Thus, in “Whose diet” there is “no answer other / than the sound that life makes” and “the thought that life’s God / is being itself.” This
dawning apprehension of God takes the speaker beyond the materiality of “life / feeding on life” to an awareness of the God of life, of something greater that goes “together” with these material processes.

**Admirable Violence**

As part of his effort to re-position the Divine in nature, Thomas also swaps out what Ted Hughes refers to as the “weak,” anthropocentric sense of violence for “admirable violence” ("Poetry and Violence" 251). This is not antithetical to the Divine but Divine in its terrible beauty – even sublime in the way it provokes both fear and awe. According to Hughes, admirable violence unites one with Christ’s sacrifice and one’s “highest spiritual being” (251). It is part of what Calvin Bedient describes as the “great sacramental unity” (55). In *Chameleon Poet*, S. J. Perry acknowledges Hughes’s essay on “Poetry and Violence” in regard to each poet’s “enduring struggle to reconcile the divinity they detected within the natural world” with the “Darwinian struggle” therein (Perry 162). Perry looks particularly at the mythic structures of both poets, but Hughes’s explanation of violence also sheds light on how Thomas adjusts his ideas of nature and God towards unity of being.

When Thomas reflects on natural violence it is often in the positive sense that Hughes discusses: it is not “a murderous force which violates a sacred law” but “a life-bringing assertion of sacred law” which “demolishes . . . a force that oppressed and violated it” (“Poetry and Violence” 254). Like Thomas, Hughes encourages his readers to rethink the “spiritual or moral consequences” that are implied by so-called “cruel,” predatory violence (255). A “weak” sentimental recoil from violence is symptomatic of one’s alienation
from the “divine law” (259) according to which we, also, must kill to eat. It is therefore hypocritical and dangerous in the same way that ignorance of our involvement in the natural order contributes to excessive, barbaric, and secretive killing which violates that order and balance and oppresses the “sacred law.” Killing is a life-bringing “sacrament,” Hughes declares. “It is not an act of violence but of [divine] law” (263) which reflects the Divine in operation in the natural world, freeing it from limited, human understanding. When an animal kills to eat it does so in “effortless” instantaneous obedience to “the creator’s law which shaped [its] being” (258). It is, in other words, being “at peace with essential being” and “at rest in the law” (260).

Thus, emphasizing and rethinking natural violence is crucial to reacquainting one with the Divine and one’s “spiritual being” in the material world. Behind this violence, Hughes continues, “presses the revelation of all that enables human beings to experience – with mystical clarity and certainty – what we call truth, reality, beauty, redemption and the . . . fundamental love” (255). Natural violence therefore expresses the sacred material foundations of Thomas’s Gaian Spirituality: it presses upon him “an expression or part of God” (Taylor 16). The sublime is, unsurprisingly, crucial in conveying this and, combined with Thomas’s raptors, the poiesis of birdwatching re-emerges. Birdwatching is again linked to revelations through which the unity of being and one’s material/spiritual being-in-the-world are reframed. Thus, as Christopher Morgan says, Thomas’s “experiences and explorations of nature continue . . . to be experiences and explorations of the self and of God” (51) – of the self’s relation to ultimate reality.

Although there is no avian predator in “The Parish” (CP 101) there is an anonymous ravening counterpart that puts these ideas in focus. In the poem
Thomas, like Robinson Jeffers, critiques the “communal people” for their sentimental, cultured distance from natural process – and thus from the wild God. The parishioners’ prim domestication from the natural-world “part” of their religious community – that whole in which, more accurately, their community exists – represents the wider communal separation from the land, especially within parochial religious communities and traditions. Only the farmer, Thomas’s quasi-prophetic figure, knows the “old violence” of nature and has “felt its power” and “loveliness” within the “green aisles” of the greater parish. He knows death and dirt – the foundations of the world – having encountered the wild Inhumanness, as it were, of nature in process. He has “watched” the mysterious and inexplicable pairing of violence and beauty, death and redemption, in “The sharp tooth tearing its prey / While a bird sang from a tall tree.” The parishioners’ anthropocentric, sanitized understanding of God, and their belief that they are “on the main road / To God” – as though He is a separate, anthropomorphic entity that is not here – is juxtaposed with the farmer’s knowledge of the raw destructive and creative power that environs the parish. Just as church, for the nature mystic, is not only a building, the parish is not simply a social community but a natural world space in which faith occurs – which is precisely what has been forgotten.

“The Parish” therefore critiques communal distance from material process as distance from God and our foundations in Him. The parishioners’ assumption that order lies only in their spiritual enclave and its emulation of that which lies beyond the wildernesses of the world not only maintains spiritual-material dualisms but disconnects them from their roots in that world, the wild presence of God, and thus the value and beauty of what the farmer knows is a much more complex order. The parishioners closet
themselves from the “old violence” of grass “rag[ing] under the floor” – the 
wild God which Thomas suggests, in a later poem,

is the wilderness imprisoned

under our flagstones yet escaping

. . . in a haemorrhage

of raw flowers. (“That there. . .” CLP 344)

Understanding our being-in-the-world by ecocentrically reframing the 
vioence and harshness of that being, in order to understand how God can be 
in the world, is crucial. The farmer is Thomas’s model in this regard: living 
within the wildness of nature he knows the wild God of the world from his 
day-to-day experiences. For the farmer, God is not “over there” at the end of 
the road but “here.” However, due to their domestication from the “old 
vioence” of their existence, the parishioners’ socially-constructed ideas of God 
make spiritual unity something which, automatically, requires transcendence 
of the “day’s dirt.” The farmer, though, has seen “The sharp tooth tearing its 
prey / While a bird sang from a tall tree.” He has known both the “power” and 
“loveliness” that are equal parts of being in the world and its wild God. 
Implicitly, he is closer to God in his awareness of natural violence and the 
otherness of God to human ideas that this entails – an otherness which is 
indeed expressive of love at the same time as it is humbling in its power. This 
otherness is “felt” and known by the farmer in such a way that it negates the 
need for the inadequate identifier “God” in this dark green experience of 
ultimate reality. Thomas thus regrounds spiritual perception in nature’s 
“green aisles.” The subtle natural world evocation of Christ’s death on the “tall 
tree,” and the parallel between the “tearing” of flesh and the Eucharistic bread, 
also afford these natural processes sacramental significance, as though loving,
redemptive, and unifying in their violent necessity. This is the sacred order and cycle of life and death with which the farmer is at peace.

Finally, the shocking stark naturalness of “tearing” acquaints reader and farmer with the wild God of their world; admirable violence asserts the sacred law and demolishes the parishioners’ sacrilegious attempt to live outside of it. The way in which the bird sings unconcernedly in the midst of all this seems to affirm the sacred nature of this violence, posing a provocative challenge to anthropocentric ideas about the God of this world. The way it “transpose[s]” violence into loveliness – or, we might say, counterpoints it – as Christopher Morgan suggests (73), also evokes the balance and coexistence of these things in the being of God.

Thomas searches, then, for what he calls in “The Untamed” (CP 140) the “wild hawk of the mind” and its “true eyrie” – that is, an undomesticated union with the unsheltered, violent realities of life. The “deep peace / Of wild places,” he suggests in the same poem, is alluring for the vitality it offers – the powerful surge of instinct rather than inhibition. This is, for the speaker, a kind of eco-spiritual allegiance to who he really is, to his spiritual values, and to the facts of his being. He casts the alternative as a “defection” from his wild heart and primal being to “softness” and “silence,” like a falcon’s hood being placed over the mind. Implicitly, the speaker does not want to be kept from either the beauty or fearfulness of the vast wild world. “A Line from St David’s” (CP 123), from the same volume of poetry, clarifies the sense in which wildness is renewing, resacralizing, and reconnecting for Thomas. Infusions of nature, like the grass in “The Parish,” remind the speaker of the foundational “industry” beneath the touristic one. This leads the way back to unity with the wild, back to the “old currents” and “the cathedral’s bubble of stone / . . .
unpricked by the mind’s needle.” All this the “communal people” in “The Parish” have lost. Thomas seeks to free the domesticated, concealing mind into the “climate of [its] conception” (CLP 204) – into the Open and unity – and reacquaint it with the mystical “wild God.”

The unity that comes from accepting the wild God is reflected in “Good” (CP 307), where another raptor briefly forms part of the poet’s vision of the Divine law. The poem, reminiscent of Keats’s ode “To Autumn,” describes an “old man” who, like the farmer in “The Parish,” is at peace with natural process. The natural cycle is calm rather than violent as the man counts his blessings, fully reconciled to the beauty that goes hand-in-hand with – and depends upon – death, which is but “the shadow under the great boughs / of life.” All around life is involved in its continuous process: “the kestrel goes by with fresh prey / in its claws,” the tractor “operates / on the earth’s body,” the man is surrounded by his descendants. “It is well,” he appears to remark indirectly, echoing God’s pronouncements in the first chapter of Genesis and evoking his connection to the creative process, and Divine law, as a creator himself.

This acceptance is reminiscent of “Swifts” (CP 154) where Thomas quietly registers what is actually the birds’ frenzied feeding as merely a “winnow[ing] [of] the air.” The “swifts’ / Restlessness,” compared to the “phone’s frenzy,” is “pleasant” because they seem to “winnow” the chaff of the contemporary world, bringing the speaker’s attention back to the true foundations of life. Beautifully and violently they “glide, / Or rip the silk of the wind,” and in their aerial acrobatics the speaker seems to find a picture of the mystery of life – not unlike the “Ambiguous undulations” of Wallace Stevens’s pigeons that “sink / Downward to darkness, on extended wings” in “Sunday
Morning” (70). However, the speaker chooses to “bring / Only my wonder to the contemplation / Of the geometry of their dark wings,” rather than bring his reason or prejudice to bear on another predatory scene. “There is no solving the problem / They pose,” he asserts,

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. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

. . . . . . . . .

that had millions of years

Behind it, when the first thinker

Looked at them.

In “Good,” the kestrel evokes the Divine law in motion and the old man’s part in it, implying the violence, pain, and suffering – perhaps like the tractor – which is an inescapable part of the nevertheless agreeable Edenic scene. The kestrel “goes by” calmly, gently, as the man is unperturbed by this aspect of existence. The man’s acceptance of all this and his own materiality intimates his understanding of the sacramental natural order, and thus his understanding of the wild God of the world. Raptor and prey, and the way they symbolically relate to the old man, remind us of the unity and equality within the natural law. The kestrel typifies that great sacramental unity; its admirable violence seems to connect the old man to his highest spiritual being. The old man’s undisturbed recognition and acceptance of this “violence” within the idyllic scene suggests how, unlike the parishioners in “The Parish,” he is at rest in the law and at peace with his essential being. The garden imagery also suggests the man’s unity through its associations with spiritual grace rather than self-conscious division.

The way that the old man accepts the creative processes on which life depends, seeming to step back from them, also suggests his larger perspective that life is not just mere, unconscious repetition but part of a timeless creative
process – the Infinite I AM that we previously discussed. This is reinforced by
the poem’s present tense and its reflection of another timeless moment of
unity, similar to those explored in Chapter Three. The old man’s sense of
unity, wholeness, and fullness – the extent alluded to by the kestrel – and his
sensuous, material involvement in his world (“sees,” “hears,” “chill,” “scent”)
evokes the basic, instinctive religious feeling of oneness that is Thomas’s
regrounded, Gaian spirituality.

In these poems, Thomas’s dark green religion can again be detected.
The old man and farmer reflect this religious perspective in their involvement
within the sacred processes of the natural world. In the next chapter we will
see that these eco-spiritual relationships with ultimate reality are more
metaphysically framed in terms of predator and prey. Further reflecting
Thomas’s dark green religion, this “kinship” with the earth – or sense of unity
– is again “accompanied by feelings of humility,” one of Bron Taylor’s defining
criteria (13). These feelings of humility reach new levels in Thomas’s “critique
of human . . . superiority” and anthropocentrism.
Chapter Five: Birds of Pray

Looking for goshawks is like looking for grace: it comes, but not often, and you don’t get to say when or how.

Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk* 5.

In the last chapter we began to see how raptors are involved in R. S. Thomas’s rethinking of anthropocentric ideas about God and nature. Raptors express the Divine law according to which the anthropomorphized God becomes un-known; they evoke the God who preys upon us: the devouring, naturalistic God of the peregrine falcon.

This chapter continues to explore how Thomas reframes ideas about God and regrounds religion “as an experience of ultimate reality” (*PBRV* 8–9). As we have begun to see, he opens up the idea of God in order to come “to terms with . . . the majesty and mystery of the universe and the natural world as a kind of symbol of God” (*AE* 19). Comprehending God’s undelimited vastness was an ongoing “difficulty” for Thomas, but grappling with the immensity of God – what he preferred to call ultimate reality – was vital. The implicit motive was to sustain – or reawaken – spiritual perception when the domestication of God and nature in a dull, “mechanized,” and “clinical” age had left behind “the murmuring of the starved heart and the uneasy spirit” (*Prose* 93).

This meant exploring the ways – sometimes from within the very scientific discourses that seemed to negate it – that God could, in line with Thomas’s Gaian Spirituality, “come in at the right place” (*Phillips, Poet of the*
The awful (in both senses of the word) otherness and inscrutability of nature, as we saw in Chapter Four, conflicts with anthropomorphic ideas of God that separate Him from the material world and attempt to bring Him within human understanding. In response, Thomas resists man’s “domesticating urge” (AE 19) and his delimiting of the Divine, linking the desire to “domesticate [God] / to our uses” to the desacralization and exploitation of the natural world. Instead, he contemplates the God that does not conform to human understanding, embracing otherness and unknowability as the self-revealing of God as other and unknowable. The God that emerges as immense, incomprehensible, and uncontainable is not a discrete, objectifiable being but being-itself – the sublime “creative spirit” that Thomas, like Wordsworth, found up Mount Snowdon (“Interview with Simon Barker” 313).

By accepting the unknowability of God, Thomas accepts the “vaster reason” and undelimited presence of the Divine. He is open to the way that ultimate reality reveals itself in every moment, as Schleiermacher describes, in a material-spiritual unity that evokes the regrounding of religion. This resacralization of the universe entails a renewed reverence for the world as more than mere, exploitable matter – a reverence which is attained through the poiesis of birdwatching. Thomas’s poetics of awe and wonder embrace God’s negative capabilities, as it were, preserving a sense of the numinous, and its inviolable mysteries, in a rational world. God commands us, as in “Mediations” (CP 275), to “Bring / your lenses to the worship / of my dimensions.” We are asked, like Moses removing his sandals in humility before the burning bush, to “put / your knowledge off and come / to me with your mind / bare.”
Thus, this chapter further explores Thomas’s response to the question of “what kind of God?”, and his relationship with the Divine, through birds of prey. As the pun suggests, birds of prey direct Thomas’s address (prayer) to the deity, reframing his approach to and ideas about God. In particular, the wild otherness of raptors reveals not God’s otherness to nature but His self-revealing – through the natural world – as that which is other and unknowable. This is not a God to whom Thomas prays with a specific listener in mind – a God upon whom the mind preys – but one which evades delimiting preconceptions. This is the God for whom the birdwatcher-priest practises the open, meditative, and humble prayer that is poiesis. This is the God who comes in His absence and otherness, preying upon us, suddenly overwhelming the mind and senses as He swoops down upon his “prey” in sublime moments of fear and rapture. This is the impersonal, disconcerting God who resists being known and yet, consolingly, seeks out the believer, revealing Himself and waiting to be accepted on His own terms. In his undelimited presence He redeems the spiritual desolation of the modern world. Ultimately, through raptors, Thomas explores his status as God’s prey, and the different perception of the Divine that this opens up.

In the end, Thomas’s emphasis on the otherness of God, and the via negatива, is positive – as has been noted in regard to his conceptions of absence as presence, or emptiness as fullness. Moreover, because of the tensions they pose for traditional conceptions of God, and the rethinking that this encourages, the otherness expressed by raptors liberates and resacralizes. Donald Davie puts it best when he explains that Thomas’s God who ‘keeps the interstices / In our knowledge, the darkness / Between stars’ was a concept not daunting but consolatory. The
religious mind finds its consolations in regions where the secular mind discerns only forbidding bleakness, and just that paradox or seeming paradox is what R.S. Thomas’s later poems resolutely explore. If one’s worst fear is that technological man may extend his knowledge to the point where no mysteries are left in the universe, then a God who can be relied on always to reveal gaps in that knowledge is a God to be thankful for. (36)

“whose attributes are the negations / Of thought”

In the poem “After the Lecture” (NBF 22) Thomas explores the disconcerting implications of knowing that God is unknowable. As the speaker grapples with this he sheds light on Thomas’s emerging spiritual practice. The speaker, having accepted the theory and “tropes / Of religion,” arrives at the inevitable “difficult question.” He asks the lecturer, not why there is pain and suffering in the world – a question which has implicitly been addressed in the explanation that God differs “in kind / From the human” – but what one can do with such knowledge. What use is prayer when God is not a being who is “there / To go to”?

In that dismissive phrase “the tropes / Of religion” there is the sense of a disconnect between religion and reality. The speaker is dissatisfied with the evasive humility of saying that “we look / Through the near end of the binocular at pain,” as well as the suggestion that if we could see the bigger picture we might see a Divine plan. The problem is how to confront the kind of God that this pain implies – and the ensuing sense of helplessness. “I have tried / Bandaging my sharp eyes / With humility,” says the speaker,
but still the hearing
   Of the ear holds; from as far off as Tibet
The cries come.
Thus, the speaker ends the poem with his question:
   From one not to be penned
   In a concept, and differing in kind
   From the human; whose attributes are the negations
   Of thought; who holds us at bay with
   His symbols, the opposed emblems
   Of hawk and dove, what can my prayers win
   For the kindred, souls brought to the bone
   To be tortured, and burning, burning
   Through history with their own strange light?

This question is fundamental to Thomas’s eco-spiritual practice. The speaker despairs of the role of prayer when the notion of a God to whom one can come in supplication – one who can be explained by human values and reason – is removed. This is discomforting and disorienting and, as Vimala Herman notes, “[t]he necessity for and inevitability of the negative” – the fact that God is unknowable – “intensifies the sense of helplessness” (723). However, this uncertainty disrupts ideas about God and prayer that posit a distant, discrete deity. Indeed, does the speaker criticize theological attempts to justify the ways of God to men (and lessen the burden of helplessness) that defer to a Divine plan with a Divine being at its centre? If so, does Thomas hint at the true role of prayer, which we have seen is less about supplication and more about a state of dwelling and unity? Conventional ideas about prayer, it seems,
contribute to our inability to see the truth not of a Divine plan but an order that is Divine.

Thus the speaker is forced to dwell in uncertainty, doubt, and tension. But although there are no answers, there are also no delimitations placed upon God. A fearful, transfixing, and predatory conception emerges of the God who, in a polysemous way, differs “in kind.” This God “holds us” like powerless prey and “holds us at bay,” as though cornering and preventing us from escaping knowledge of Him. But God also “holds us at bay” by resisting our apprehension with His antinomies and unknowability as “hawk and dove.” Accordingly, the relationship with God is turned from one in which we pray to Him – addressing Him as a listener, a being formed according to our conceptual terms – to one in which God preys upon the mind, harrying and bewildering one’s understanding of Him. This wild unknowability and otherness opens up the ostensibly violent, predatory natural order as an expression of the Divine, forcing us to evaluate the ways we distance Him, and subsequently ourselves, from nature.

The hawk conflicts with the conventional symbol of the dove, disrupting that particular understanding of God. Instead, the Divine commands fearful, wordless wonder. However, the dove is not simply replaced by the hawk – this would continue to determine and so delimit the being of God – but held in tension with it. God is represented by both of His “opposed emblems”; unknowability means existing in the gap between hawk and dove – tensions that are only irreconcilable according to human reason. Thomas explores how God encompasses violence and peace, suffering and mercy, predator and prey – the “antinomies / of existence” (Prey 26), in other words. This reflects his commitment to dwell within the “vaster reason” of a Divine
order instead of within binaries that are divisive and symptomatic of rational
disunity with the ground of being. In what is a statement of truth and an
injunction not to violate the ineffable, ultimate reality is “not to be penned /
In” by thought; neither domesticated, transcribed, or circumscribed. Indeed,
the God represented by hawk and dove simultaneously defends and proclaims
Himself, aggressively, from His corner. He “holds us at bay” and turns
vulnerably, as that image also suggests, to face his assailers. We need to come
to terms with God’s vastness, Thomas suggests, and remain vigilant against
our tendency to obscure that vastness.

The otherness and unknowability of God therefore becomes all that we
can – and may – know about Him. God reveals Himself in the negative and we
are forced to confront how what we know is that which we do not know. God is
the negation of thought: the disaffirmation, contradiction, and absence of
knowledge.

“After the Lecture” illustrates the necessary and inevitable tension in
which we apprehend the being of God. Accordingly, prayer becomes about
dwelling in uncertainty, however disquieting, rather than seeking to “win”
mercy from some anthropomorphized being. The speaker has to accept what
Thomas elsewhere describes as:

a relationship
broken; the possibility of a listener
removed; soliloquy replacing
a dialogue between two minds. (“Temptation,” CLP 351)

Thomas disputes the idea of an intimate, sentimental relationship between
Man and God; instead he explores, in his own words, relationships of
“dialogue, encounter, confrontation” (“Introduction” to A Choice of George
Herbert’s Verse 16). This reflects the kind of faith that fully co-exists with doubt and therefore does not impose human reason on the Divine. God is “wholly other” to humanity, as W. V. Davis quotes from Kierkegaard, one of Thomas’s great philosophical influences (R. S. Thomas 125). Accordingly, any relationship with God, as Davis then notes, is “filled with ‘fear and trembling.’”

However, when we accept that all we know is what we do not know, then we do not delimit God. In an overwhelming yet reassuring way, all we know becomes All we know. This is to be God’s prey rather than to pray/prey upon and confine the Divine within “our definition of him,” as Thomas puts it in “The White Tiger” (CP 358). For Thomas, knowing God means being subject to, and at the mercy of, the immensities of His being and the implications for our being-in-the-world; it is to be caught up in a sometimes harsh reality that proclaims God’s absence as an impersonal presence.

Ultimately, this reflects what Thomas calls the “ability to be in hell,” which he says is a “spiritual prerogative” that “proclaims” our “true nature” as spiritual, not merely material, beings (PBRV 11). Thomas frames this as a kind of spiritual anguish: being “in hell,” as part of being a spiritual being, means being able to stand back from the unity of being and comprehend it as the absence, the nothing that is everything, that is God. To be in hell means to be, as J. D. Vicary explains, “where God is absent” (44), where He is experienced, disconcertingly, as absence. It is thus both alienating and unifying. As Vicary also notes, “[t]he experience of ‘Nothing’ was part of the ‘experience of ultimate reality’ which was how Thomas defined religion” (43–44). This re-emphasizes Thomas’s mystical, regrounded religious awareness of the unity of being. The ability to be in hell – that place of fear and doubt over not knowing God and feeling adrift in an indifferent reality – is therefore also a blessing: it
opens one to the otherness and undelimited being of God. The way that absence also means presence for Thomas entails that being “in hell” is being where God is absent in the fullest religious sense of not being a separate, conceptualized being but the ground of being. Moreover, this “ability” indicates that the human capacity to stand back from and conceive the unity of being is testament to the existence of a deeper creative, more-than-material reality – as we noted in Thomas’s thicket essay. In other words, in perceiving the absence of God we perceive His presence.

Thomas therefore presents our spiritual being not as something that prevents us from dwelling but as something which leads us to the “climate of our conception” (CLP 204), the creative source of our being, as discussed in Chapter Three, where the mind dwells in its experience of the unity that is God. In “hell” we exist according to our “true nature,” through which we may discover how God is absence – not a being who is absent – and comprehend the material/spiritual unity of which we are a part. In other words, the ability to be in hell apprises us of the deeper unity of being and our connection to that unity as spiritual beings.

Thomas’s birds of prey are caught up in this dynamic because their shocking, predatory otherness elicits a “hellish” reckoning with the nature of God. When he beholds a bird of prey Thomas evokes a “sense of holy dread” – a sublime, extra-sensory experience of the Divine as though, like Job, “a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up” (A 145). He is given over to wonder and awe at the “Being” that keeps the universe “in balance.” The bird of prey also opens Thomas to the self-disclosing of God as the ground of being, opening him to the deeper understanding and dwelling that is prayer. Thus, through raptors we see how the birdwatcher-priest supplants ideas
about God that prey on Him as a discrete being. Instead he accepts, in prayer, how God preys upon him and preys upon the mind.

“here . . . then / not here”

It is beautiful and still;
the air rarefied
as the interior of a cathedral

expecting a presence. It is where, also,
the harrier occurs,
materialising from nothing, snow-

soft, but with claws of fire,
quartering the bare earth
for the prey that escapes it;

hovering over the incipient
scream, here a moment, then
not here, like my belief in God.

(“Moorland,” CP 513)

In “Moorland” Thomas further contemplates the otherness of God through the otherness of nature. In the harrier hawk the speaker sees an image of the Divine and his relationship with it. The hawk becomes an
instance of God’s self-revelation as wild, other, and unknowable, and as simultaneously predator and prey. As the ground of being, God is that which is known in moments of sudden apprehension. He is also the prey that escapes.

In the poem, a harrier hawk is identified with an instance of Divine revelation, becoming a metaphor for the speaker’s relationship with God that again connects birdwatching to a metaphysical moment. The poem therefore depicts how the Divine is conveyed through and expressed by the natural world. The hawk “occurs” while the speaker is out wandering on the moor’s “cathedral” where the air is “still” in anticipation of revelation. The hawk is presented as a sublime, elemental creature that envelops the speaker’s mind. Its appearance figures the moment of Divine revelation and consummate “belief in God.” Subsequently, the hawk’s disappearance reflects the speaker’s fluctuation between faith and doubt, a fluctuation which is interwoven in the experience of God as the presence that is an absence, the ground of being. Thus the harrier conveys the complex nature of God and the speaker’s relationship with Him.

The harrier metaphor functions on two levels: firstly, as discussed in the previous chapter, the imagery of the hawk evokes the unity of being – of violence and beauty – in God. Secondly, the harrier’s appearance and disappearance represents the “moment” of unity or “belief” (and its lapse) in which the presence of God is felt. When the hawk materializes from “nothing,” the speaker evokes the sublime moment in which absence becomes presence and ultimate reality suddenly reveals Itself, consuming and filling the mind with awe. This presence is not bound by time or place – as “occurs” suggests – but opened up as the ground of being that is not revealed by but reveals itself to the mind.
In this moment it is as though the hawk is God, preying upon the speaker rather than being prayed (and preyed) upon. W. V. Davis suggests that the pun on prey “seems obvious” (“The Lame Feet of Salvation” 164), and thus “Moorland” depicts another instance in which Thomas disrupts ideas about God and prayer. The poem intimates how God is not a being to whom we pray with preconceived ideas about the listener, but being-itself which preys upon the senses and fills the mind. In this way, Thomas again reflects a Schleiermachian regrounding of religion. Ultimate reality reveals itself to the birdwatcher, who is its vulnerable and helpless prey.

However, the way that the harrier’s prey “escapes,” and the harrier then disappears together with the speaker’s “belief in God,” complicates the analogy. The speaker, it seems, escapes God’s grasp – that sense of unity, in other words – and thus in another sense God “escapes” (as the pun implies) the speaker’s comprehension as the hawk disappears into the ether. Therefore God is also the “prey that escapes,” making the pun on “prey” even more theologically complex and poietic. God preys upon the mind, revealing Himself to our intuition, but He also “escapes” comprehension and apprehension as the ground of being. However, when Thomas prays according to the poethics of birdwatching, as the speaker does on the moor, that which was the object of prayer – his prey – becomes the predator who apprises him of its presence. Thus, prayer is not about supplication (as though we know to whom or what we speak) but being preyed upon – that is, being open to the vaster reason.

“Moorland” therefore paints a complicated picture in which the relationship with God is one of unity and disunity, faith and doubt, presence and absence. God is the predator and the prey that escapes and eludes prayer.
In a sense, then, the speaker is the hawk that pursues Him, the “harrier” that “occurs” in the already spiritually-resonant moor. Indeed, that three-word line also invites us to read it separately from its avian context. The speaker is certainly doing what Thomas does best: “praying” upon God in the moor’s pregnant “rarefied / . . . cathedral,” harrying and scrutinizing the nature of Divinity.

But of course, this is because God harries Thomas, as is perfectly captured by the terrifying beauty of the harrier. Thus, the harrier hawk represents the relationship between speaker and God – a relationship of harrying. This suggests that in Thomas’s prey/pray dynamic God preys upon the mind and senses, revealing and concealing Himself in a way that alters the conventional idea of prayer from an address – as though to a presupposed, distinct entity – to a poethic that reflects Thomas’s regrounding of religion. God simultaneously preys upon us, revealing Himself in a sudden, rapturous seizure of the senses, and escapes the harrying mind. Thus, S. J. Perry – albeit for reasons beyond the tension between God and natural violence, which is his focus – is correct when he states that “the awe-inspiring majesty of the [harrier] is the perfect metaphor for [Thomas’s] dilemma” (Chameleon Poet 195). The harrier encapsulates the search for God: the sublime sense yet inapprehensible nature of Divinity, the ways in which God reveals Himself, and the way in which God escapes revelation. God is there – as that which preys upon us, and upon which we prey – and not there as that absence which escapes our understanding.

In these ways, “Moorland” explores how God is that presence which is an absence, not a being but the ground of being that is “here a moment, then / not here.” The presence, or rather the fleeting revelation and awareness of that
presence, is figured by the harrier. The hawk simply happens; it “materialises from nothing,” evoking the way that absence/nothing is presence/something. The raptor comes and goes, but only like the speaker’s “belief in God” for it is not God as such – not a being who is here, then not here, but a revelation of the presence that is always there. Indeed, the speaker intimates the presence of God independently of the harrier – which “also, / . . . occurs” – and before it appears. The moor, Thomas’s recurring liminal site where the material and spiritual intersect, is “expecting a presence,” as though it will be here shortly and yet is already here in this pregnant, “rarefied / . . . cathedral.”

The harrier, then, is an analogy for how the speaker’s awareness of God as the ground of being – the sense of unity and “belief” – comes and goes. It evokes how God is not a discrete, finite being but the appearing and disappearing ground of being. Because the hawk is not God, its disappearance does not signify God’s disappearance but rather the vanishing of the speaker’s belief. God’s presence, in effect, remains constant; because the harrier “also” occurs, God implicitly persists beyond its disappearance. God remains present in the hawk’s wake and the speaker’s disbelief. The hawk’s appearance and disappearance echoes the way that God is “here” and “not here” to the believer; an absence that is like a presence. God reveals and conceals Himself in every moment, and thus we see Thomas’s regrounded view of God as the unity of being. God is always coming into being, as suggested by the present participles attributed to the hawk –“materialising,” “expecting,” “hovering,” “quartering.” God exists between the material and palpable, the ethereal and unformed. Similarly, God “occurs,” as though unbound by space or time. He is “incipient,” always about to take shape in the believer’s mind like the “scream”
of recognition of the raptor’s prey which “escapes” such knowledge. God is there, the poem suggests, but sometimes our “belief” – outside of experiencing the fullness of His presence – is not. Thus the harrier renders and represents the moment of revelation and wonder in which the Divine fills the mind and then withdraws.

The harrier is therefore a metaphor for the believer’s relationship with God and his experience of ultimate reality. For spiritual, more-than-material beings God, and belief, are simultaneously here and not here. Thomas therefore appears to describe being “in hell” (PBRV 11) – that spiritual “prerogative” that entails being or dwelling where and when God is that absence, Stevens’s “Nothing that is not there and . . . nothing that is” (“The Snow Man,” Collected Poems 10). This allows us to read the poem’s last two lines in a more complex way. The speaker’s “belief in God” is “here a moment, then / not here,” but it does not seem to be merely an either/or situation. Taken by itself, the last line reads “not here, like my belief,” suggesting that the speaker’s belief is “not here” – an odd, self-cancelling way to describe belief. Can belief be here and not here – not just present and absent but there when it is not there? The poem suggests that belief, like the harrier, “occurs” and withdraws but, at a deeper level, involves a state of being in which the absence of belief is the deepest belief – dwelling in the unity of being in which the Divine is simultaneously “here” and “not here.” The speaker’s belief is here and not here when his mind fills with the presence of the harrier, evoking Thomas’s regrounded definition of religion as the “the total response of the whole person to reality” (PBRV 8–9). Equally, when the hawk disappears the speaker’s belief is not here and here, for what is faith without doubt? The absence of belief – the sense of disunity, in other words – presupposes the
other and makes belief what it is. Thus it seems that in the elusive presence of
the harrier Thomas describes how belief incorporates faith and doubt as
inseparable from, and meaningless without, each other. To be “in hell” is to
grapple with the extent of what this means and the sense of the sublime
magnitude of the Divine which, in “The Moor,” brings to the wanderer a
“moistening of the eye” and “stillness / Of the heart’s passions” (CP 166). To
be “in hell” is to be where God is not and therefore is; it is to be confronted
with the fearsome inhumaness of ultimate reality – which the hawk conveys
– and the mystery and unknowing that leads one to “a human repetition of the
cry from the Cross: ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!’” (PBRV 11).

An “eagle-vacated sky”

“Two Views of Olympos” (CLP 325-326) further explores the otherness
of God, evoking a link back to a rich, mythological past of Divine mystery and
omnipotence. The speaker’s “sublime” presentation of God amends his initial
conception – conditioned by the reductionist scientific gaze – of an “effete /
god,” awakening him to the vast unknowability and self-disclosing of the
Divine in the world.

In the first “view” a birdwatcher – for the poem is likely set during
Thomas’s birdwatching trip to Greece – reaches the top of Mount Olympos
and mocks or refutes the expected sublime experience of Divine revelation. He
evokes how science and technology desacralize the world and interrupt
spiritual perception as he revels in his “omniscience”:

Modern technology of late
took us sufficiently quickly
up Olympos as to surprise God
at his absence. The water
was not holy but merely
the mineral $H_2O$.

The speaker does not simply pronounce God’s absence but seems to mock God with His absence and ironically “surprise” Him with the fact that He is not there. At the same time, though, Thomas suggests that God is surprised by His ambushers’ conclusion. “[O]f late” and “us” make this ascent up Olympos a metaphor for the way society has recently ascended to the holy places too fast to be still and see beyond the way technology conditions its gaze.

“[S]ufficiently” rings with the capitalist apathy, efficiency, and economy that govern the experience of nature, concealing the unity of being. Mechanistic reductionism conditions a world in which God appears “absent” (if not nonexistent) and matter is composed “merely” of chemicals. Meanwhile, the touristic commoditization of nature makes once-sacred places curious only for their so-called primitive past. This deprives God of His potency like the Biblical figure Samson, binding _Divinity_ instead of the Promethean thieves that return with the “secrets” of Life:

> In summer
> a god is shorn of his locks
> to be bound invisibly with tourism’s chains. . . .

Like Prometheus we returned
jubilant with the omniscience
we had appropriated from an effete
god

However, after triumphantly descending the mountain, the speaker is forced
to rethink this “effete / god.” In the hotel he finds that a child has “been born /
to the proprietors and born simple.” This perverted manger scene poses
questions about that god:

Above us in the afterglow
of our relish the mountain began
putting on size, imponderable
as unscaleable, towering
as that other had towered
above Wordsworth, so that we gazed
into it as into the cave at Delphi
from which there would issue answers
leading to questions to answers
to more questions in the infinite regress.

The speaker is jolted not only by the presence of suffering and imperfection in
nature – especially against the grand natural backdrop – but also by the
remembrance of that God who came to the world in His own loving weakness.
If the effeteness of God is proven in this incarnation, it is not so much His
weakness or powerlessness but rather the problem of His imponderable
depravity. The question of “what kind of God” stubbornly returns.

In the shadow of Olympos, the speaker experiences Wordsworth’s
“sense sublime” of an undelimited presence. It is a sensory experience of the
being that is not a being but being itself – the Infinite I AM that we discussed
in Chapter Three. The mountain towers above him, unscaleable by thought,
evincing – like Wordsworth’s experience on Mount Snowdon – an awe-inspiring “majestic intellect,” a “mind / That feeds upon infinity” (*The Prelude* 356). This is what Thomas, reflecting on Wordsworth’s experience, calls a “semi-mystical” moment of “being in touch with creative spirit” (“Interview with Simon Barker” 313). He admits that rather than a God conceived in “human terms” he feels “much more at home with Wordsworth’s vision of Snowdon in *The Prelude*, where he says, ‘It seemed to me the type of majestic intelligence . . . the emblem of a mind that feeds upon infinity’” (“Interview with Graham Turner”). As the speaker’s poietic, spiritual perception of the unknowable and transcendent unfolds, his imagined “omniscience” leads only to “more questions” in an “infinite regress.” He can only reason backwards from the “imponderable” to an irreducible truth. The speaker thus turns from a secularized, intellectual reductionism to an intuitive, sensory experience of ultimate reality that represents the regrounding of religious experience.

View Two of the poem, by contrast, intimates openness to the presence of God, seeming to ask how we can expand the idea of a God who is, as D. Z. Phillips says, “contingently hidden,” so that “the possibilities of religious belief [can] come in at the right place” (*Poet of the Hidden God* 153, ix). The speaker questions the idea that religion is over and that we have reached the top of the mountain, as it were, to find God not there. He therefore challenges his rapid, limited assessment, looking for a way to keep the mythic past alive and re-envision the presence of God.

Went to Greece; Olympos deserted, or so I imagined

it from the silence. But in case

the god was in hiding
up one of the gorges, impenetrable
as his shadow, I said, lifting
my prisms to the eagle-vacated
sky: “There is a past here
rivaling our own past.”

Against this supposed Divine desertion and spiritual desertification, the speaker considers the possibility of a hidden god – Thomas’s Deus absconditus. God may be “in hiding,” or hidden, because the holy places of the world have become a spiritual desert in the modern era. Thus, the speaker surveys the “eagle-vacated / sky,” studying the absence and using his “prisms” to implicitly invert the sky’s image of absence. The term “prisms” may also suggest the speaker’s awareness that his vision is limited by the ability of a scientific instrument when different lenses – i.e. other ways of looking – are needed. Accordingly, the speaker does not equate “silence” with absence: God may be concealing Himself rather than conforming to the logic that determines His absence. God may be present as that “imponderable” being that is not a being but “impenetrable / as his shadow”: an absence, untouchable yet dense and enveloping; abstruse yet intelligible in His obscurity. God casts the shadow of His presence rather than being directly knowable and reducible. The speaker intimates, then, that God is knowable in His absence, silence, and impenetrability. He is the negative prefix that we find throughout “Two Views”; the negation of thought, a “shadow,” an “afterglow.”

The speaker’s travel-log style reflects how he came to Greece to discover if its holy places have been “deserted” and then bring back a “message” from this “depopulated / temple” to his “equally / depopulated
country.” The “emptiness” of his “culture,” he suggests, is a “reflection / of the emptiness of our religion.” The message arrives in the form of a raptor, suggesting the suddenness of the epiphany sought at Olympos:

Then suddenly above me like a fleck
on the mind a raptor appeared
traversing my lenses. ‘Yes, on your way,’
I murmured.

As in “Moorland,” the raptor appears as an instance of Divine revelation. At one level, it represents the presence of God (or Zeus) – and hence mythic or spiritual continuity – in what was an “eagle-vacated sky.” The raptor seems to coincide with and signify a flash of intuition about God in the speaker’s mind. But the raptor is also an omen of the state of things. The speaker murmurs in understanding that like Prometheus he – though not having appropriated knowledge, as in View One – will be another “truth-teller” who gets no rest from his efforts:

‘Yes, on your way,’
I murmured, ‘to your gnawing
at Prometheus’ liver, as back home
the envy of a carrion-loving people
worries at the probity and the reputation
of the truth-teller, who would do them good.’

While the eagle is mythically associated with Divine punishment, here the speaker evokes a perverted mythic continuity whereby he, the truth-teller, is afflicted by his “carrion-loving” people when he tries to “do them good.” He will be punished for his attempt to bring truth to a people who will not hear it and for whom religion is empty. Aside from its implicit criticisms of Wales –
the “depopulated country” which we will consider in the next chapter – the poem contemplates the spiritual desolation and “depopulated / temple” of modern society. In this way, the necessity of opening up ideas about God, resacralizing the world, and restoring that awe in the first view, becomes apparent.

“I think of him rather / as an enormous owl”

Of all Thomas’s raptors the owl is his greatest representative of God’s otherness. As John Barnie observes, “[t]he hunting owl recurs several times in the poetry as an emblem of everything that Thomas delights in yet fears in nature” (“Was R. S. Thomas an Atheist Manque?” 71–72). As we have seen, this uncertainty subsequently extends to the God behind the natural world. The owl’s frightening supernatural associations evoke a God that challenges human understanding. In “Bestiary” (CLP 272-276) the barn owl “belongs not / / to the mind’s order” and its “acetylene / eyes” defy expression by poet and painter. The owl in “The Minister” (CP 42-55), we will recall, cries “[d]erision” on the “God of love,” while in “Barn Owl” (CP 319) it is “the voice / of God in the darkness cursing himself / fiercely for his lack of love.” In the same poem the owl is “soft / feathers camouflaging a machine,” as though the mechanistic world revealed by science is answered with the God of that Machine, as in the poem “Rough.” In “Bestiary,” the “talons revolve / and the beak strikes” (CLP 272).

Accordingly, the terrifying reality of the owl – and thus of its creator – makes it “the forming / of white frost in a believer, / when he would pray.” The owl’s call falls “with a feather’s softness / but as frigidly as snow” (CLP
276) as the poet struggles with the paradoxes it reflects. Its call also moves “direct through / the ear to the heart, / refrigerating it,” evoking Thomas’s chilling sense of the sublime. This reflects his intuitive, primal knowledge of – and encounter with – God, and his regrounding of the religious experience. An overwhelming yet reassuring sense of the impersonal God that is not a being but the ground of being – the mind that feeds upon infinity – emerges from such experiences. When the insomniac speaker in “There are nights that are so still” (ERS 79) contemplates “that other being who is awake . . . / . . . for eternity” it is after hearing the “small owl calling / far off.”24 In the stillness and darkness the owl’s haunting presence evokes the absence and loneliness, yet also constancy, that characterizes the experience of “that other being” and of being “in hell.” The line-break also registers this tension – that is, the timelessness, closeness, and yet distance of the Divine. This God is the everything that is no-thing, the timeless unity of being that is not knowable by the detached, rational mind. Thus in “He?” (CLP 302) Thomas describes God as “a clock without hands” and, in “Bestiary” (CLP 272), the owl has “a clock’s face” with “no time / on it.”

In “Raptor” (CLP 256) Thomas opens up God against the reductive and domesticating tendencies of science, evoking His wild otherness through that of the natural world. The poet turns to the owl, once again, in order to restore a sense of Divine wonder, and re-emphasize the wild as an outpost of the sacred in a world which, in getting further and further away from the wild, has insulated itself from its natural and spiritual foundations.

24 Nb. This poem is also collected in CP as “The Other” (CP 457) having previously been published in Destinations (1985).
The speaker begins by criticizing how this “analytic and clinical” age – to use Thomas’s words (Prose 93) – has inverted an intuitive awe before the creative force at the heart of existence:

You have made God small,
setting him astride
a pipette or a retort
studying the bubbles,
absorbed in an experiment
that will come to nothing.

The chain of being has been altered as the scientist presides over and orders God. As the creator of his experiment, he objectifies God, “studying” and observing Him, applying his own understanding, and reducing the ineffable to an elemental make-up. The image of the Almighty straddling tiny scientific instruments makes this reductionism absurd. Similarly, the pun on “retort” evokes how God has been distilled and decomposed into mere matter and a mere idea, while suggesting the scientist’s over-confidence – as though science has the last word.

However, “absorbed” in his investigation – fixated on minute details which obscure the bigger picture, and absorbing what he sees without reflection – the scientist will meet its limitations. The experiment will arrive at “nothing” – that is, the emptiness and absence of matter and God, and the “nothing” that is God which the scientist will implicitly fail to grasp. This approach will either prove nothing or prove the non-existence of God, which in both cases make it pointless. The problem is, as Christopher Manes clarified earlier, that scientific inquisition can introduce limits to the self-disclosing of ultimate reality. The scientist sets out with preconceived expectations and

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questions which determine “in advance” what he is looking for and the “type of knowledge worth learning” (“A Natural History of Silence” 194). Thus he will find that God is not there, but only because God is not confined to one place or being at a time but, as the poem says, “abroad in the shadows.”

The speaker therefore imagines God in a way that neither anthropomorphizes nor “makes” God – as though the role of creator has been usurped – into some thing. “I think of him rather / as an enormous owl,” he writes, “abroad in the shadows.” Thomas settles on the owl metaphor because it preserves and highlights the mystery and autonomy of God, who cannot be reduced or tamed. As he asks: “how shall we attempt to describe or express ultimate reality except through metaphor or symbol?” (Prose 90). The metaphor implies a resemblance between owl and God that is subsequently explored, but it also evokes a gap, an essential otherness. Thus the comparative and not definitive medium of metaphor suggests that, although God is like an owl in ways that are intuitively meaningful to the speaker, He is still greater than anything that can be “absorbed in an experiment.” Importantly, the owl is neither seen nor seen as God: it is an image, an attempt to fasten on to an idea of the Divine with the understanding that, ultimately, it fastens itself onto one’s consciousness. The speaker thus suggests that God can be comprehended in diverse ways, and his particular image preserves and highlights God’s wildness and otherness. Accordingly, the speaker does not say “You should think of him rather / as . . .” – which would be prescriptive and delimiting – but offers an imaginative image that reflects his intuited apprehension of the Other. Perhaps what is most significant is that, at the same time as it expands its tenor, Thomas’s image
expands its vehicle: the owl must also be like God, which serves to compound

the perception of the Divine in the world.

Thus, while the scientist’s distillations reveal “nothing,” the speaker’s imaginative and poietic mindfulness opens him to a non-rational, intuitive, material and spiritual apprehension of the God that eludes disclosure. As the Blake Scholar Kathleen Raine notes in one essay, “imaginative apprehension goes always [with] a sense of the sacred” – a sense which is “precluded by the materialist mentality whose world is a lifeless world” (186). Thomas’s owl awakens spiritual perception in a despiritualized world and makes a case for poiesis against the absence that follows from putting God to the question and dictating the terms of His revelation. On this note, the environmental scientist James Lovelock, whom Bron Taylor discusses as a prophet of dark green religion, further explains the importance of the religious metaphor:

We have to use the crude tool of metaphor to translate conscious ideas into unconscious understanding. . . . it may be wrong of [reductionist scientists] to reject the metaphors and fables of the sacred texts [for example]. Crude they may be but they serve to ignite an intuitive understanding of God and creation that cannot be falsified by rational argument. (Taylor 38)

Indeed, Thomas’s owl metaphor enlarges the being of God through appealing to the sensory, intuitive understanding that is a hallmark of dark green religion. The owl is “abroad in the shadows”; it is at large, roaming the world. Its silent wings span the unbounded shadows

brushing me sometimes

. . . so the blood

in my veins freezes
The raptor elicits that “sense of holy dread” before the Divine through which the immensity of ultimate reality is speechlessly experienced. The speaker’s primal fear when God is felt like the touch of an owl’s wing reflects a non-rational apprehension of the spiritual – that old religious feeling that Thomas described in reference to Job. The material and spiritual come together in hair-raising moments that recall the physical, regrounding impact of the sublime. Thomas’s owl therefore evokes the tendency of dark green religion – and thus its links to the sublime – to encounter the sacred in “wild, untamed nature,” including “encounters with fierce, wild animals” (Taylor 45).

The sublime, as Bron Taylor notes, is linked to “the perception of the holy, whether conceived of as a sacred place, object or divinity” (45). Arguably, Thomas’s poem does not depict an actual experience of the sublime, but at the very least it imaginatively incorporates those aspects, including the related feeling of “astonishment” that Edmund Burke identifies as

that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended,
with some degree of horror. . . .[and in which] the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other [thing]. (Taylor 45)

In the poem, the speaker’s blood is suspended (frozen) and his mind filled with the “enormous owl” – its terrifying yet fascinating allure, its combination of violence and beauty – that occupies the rest of the poem and fastens on to his consciousness. In this way, “Raptor” presents the experience of the Divine as one in which, similar to those timeless moments that were explored in Chapter Three, the mind is caught up within and overwhelmed by the presence of the numinous. The speaker’s consciousness blends with ultimate reality in a moment of shock (or being “in hell”) at its impersonal and awful
(in both senses of the word) vastness. The primordial “enormous owl,” like God in “The Presence,” has “the universe / to be abroad in” (CP 391).

This is the experience of what Thomas calls, using a phrase introduced by the theologian Rudolf Otto, “an ultimate reality beyond human attainment, the mysterium tremendum et fascinans” (PBRV 9). “Raptor,” with its turn to the sublime, encompasses the numinous as mysterium (which one commentator defines as “wholly other,” to which we can only respond wordlessly and non-rationally), tremendum (provoking terror, fear, awe, and dread as an overwhelming power), and fascinans (drawing us in through “fascination” and “delighted rapture” at its mercy and grace, perhaps in the enlightened manner of Hughes’s admirable violence) (Hastings 505). As Thomas says, faced with this revelation of God, “[w]hat there must be is awe” (“Interview with Graham Turner”).

Otto’s emphasis on the human subject’s religious feeling of the numinous, and these links to sublimity, further indicate Thomas’s regrounding of religion. Both sensuous experiences of the sacred occur within the context of secularization and resacralization – that is, the move away from conventional, anthropocentric religion as the universe itself becomes sacred. “Raptor” highlights this, offering a new religious framework in a world where, as Thomas reflects in A Year in Llŷn, “God and beauty and the like” have gone “to oblivion, leaving behind them a world that [is] nothing but a mathematical variation on atoms” (A 145). The poet goes beyond the objective to an intuitive, embodied spiritual perception that unifies the material and spiritual – and unifies them in the human being. Finally, in this movement from “nothing” to the unseen owl in the shadows, we might also construe, in the
mysterium tremendum et fascinans, an expression of being “in hell” and the spiritual anguish yet awareness entailed by this.

Significantly, the poem’s speaker presents the feeling of being caught up within – and at the mercy of – ultimate reality in terms of a predatory relationship between him and God. The owl is able
to find his way from one soul to another because he can see in the dark.
The speaker has also heard him scream, too, fastening his talons in his great adversary, or in some lesser denizen, maybe, like you or me.

As the metaphor continues, the speaker depicts himself as the owl’s prey, inverting the scientist’s position “over” God and evoking the encounter as ferocious and overpowering. The spiritual experience is almost physical in its intensity, crucially enlivening and thus corrective of the inert god revealed by the scientist. Indeed, this is especially meaningful given Thomas’s view, in “Unity,” that “scientists of the past fell prey to their own concepts, mistaking their symbols for reality itself” (33). The limitations of that materialism are here non-rationally proven. God controls our experience of Him, preying upon us rather than being preyed upon. Knowing or embracing God – prayer, in other words – is about being God’s prey. God chooses when to reveal Himself,
He preys upon the mind in His otherness, and He suddenly “fasten[s]” Himself on to one’s consciousness.

This new relationship of humility means being open to the ways in which God reveals Himself. Thus, the way in which “able” hangs at the stanza-break reinforces how God is not, as in the laboratory, disabled. Accordingly, the nature of that ability is left open: God controls His revelation which, together with His predatory aspect, corrects our understanding of Him. In this relationship, the human can make no assumptions that predetermine the nature of God. The speaker instead evokes his powerlessness against the mysterious mercy and grace of God: he can only wait for the raptor to “happen” as in “Moorland” or “Barn Owl” (CP 319), where “the owl happens / like white frost,” materializing as a chilling, intuited sensation. The speaker’s vulnerability is further accentuated because he implicitly casts about “in the dark” while the stalking God can “see.”

When God does emerge, He seizes – as the Latin root of the poem’s title reinforces – upon the senses so entirely that His self-revelation is violent.\textsuperscript{25} This conveys the overpowering intensity of ultimate reality, which is comprehended instinctively in a moment of holy fear in which the speaker experiences, with vivid clarity, God’s revelation as other and encompassing. Accordingly, the speaker does not quite “believe in angels, / / those feathered overtones / in love’s rafters” for this imagery does not encompass the complexity of God’s self-revelation.

However, in the intensity of this revelation there is the sense of rapture – of being carried away by overwhelming emotion – which the poem, its title, \textsuperscript{25} Nb. The title also conjures the sense of something primeval and prehistoric, which is surely part of the symbolic appeal of birds.
and indeed Thomas’s fascination with raptors, play on. Implicitly, there is consolation and enlightenment in the way that God preys on us and reveals Himself. To be God’s prey is to experience the fullness of His presence and thus enter into a fuller communion or prayer. “Fastening” encapsulates these tensions: the way that God reveals Himself, sinking His talons into His prey, simultaneously evokes the state of rapture and discloses His fierce closeness, even protectiveness. Furthermore, because this rapture occurs at the same time as there is fear, the poem suggests that the two – grace and fear – are united in our experience of ultimate reality and the being of God. The raptor God finds His way from “one / soul to another” in a predatory as well as compassionate way, overwhelming us with His immense presence. When He screams, “fastening / his talons” in his prey, He makes His presence piercingly felt.

God reveals Himself in this way to both His “great / adversary” and, presumably, the believer. Just what – or who – the former is remains unclear. Perhaps it is the scientist, perhaps it is the priest that in dictating his terms and thus limiting his answers, is “no better than the scientist or the philosopher, who put life to the question” (Prose 151). Regardless, God’s ambit extends to we “lesser / denizen[s],” democratizing and regrounding the religious experience in an age where God otherwise goes to “oblivion.”

“Grateful always”

“Prey” (Prey 29) is the title poem of an as yet unpublished collection of R. S. Thomas’s posthumous poetry, edited by M. Wynn Thomas. In the poem, the birdwatcher-priest further explores the undelimited being of God,
suggesting that the unknowability and self-revealing of God is ultimately comforting rather than alienating.

In the poem the speaker is grateful that “at times” the “one known / primarily for / his absence” reveals His presence. Although the speaker does not use the term, it is “God” – or rather his idea of God – to which he refers. Specifically, the speaker is

Grateful always
that not always
nor often, but that
at times [God] came.

The speaker’s description of these rare moments suggests that “God” does not quite capture what he means. His is an experience of unity – of the eternal ground of being or Kingdom of Heaven – reminiscent of the experience in “The Bright Field” (CP 302). This was
to a poor man riches
beyond call, a pearl,
discovered in the soul’s
shallows, to sell everything
to possess[.] (“Prey”)

Further reinforcing the connections to “The Bright Field,” the speaker continues that his experience was

the reward for disciplining
the tongue, for waiting
upon silence, for pausing
to ask why the heart
loitered when acceleration
was the rule.

This turning aside, this stillness and openness to the self-revealing of God, brings an awareness of His deeper presence. As the speaker puts it:

Thinking
to lie in wait, I
was laid in wait
for, and praying
I was made the prey
of for all time the most
compassionate of raptors.

Thomas condenses many reframed ideas about God and his relationship with Him into these deceptively simple lines. When God reveals Himself, the speaker realizes that rather than lying “in wait” for God – as though waiting to prey upon Him when He passes by – God has been lying in wait for him. Specifically, the speaker realizes that he “was laid in wait / for” – that is, awaited by the “most / compassionate of raptors” – and, as the passive voice and line-break suggest, “laid in wait” by the raptor God for His coming. The point here is that God’s agency is restored; God controls His revelation while the speaker’s role is changed from active to passive. The speaker seems to realize this only when He does, in the other sense of the line, poetically “lie in wait” for God, “waiting / upon silence” with a non-interrogative, quietened mind rather than preying upon God in his prayers.

These inversions suggest that God waits for the speaker to submit to His self-revelation and thereby gain an awareness of the Divine not as some thing that he waits for – as though it is not here, and as though he knows what constitutes its presence or absence – but which is already here waiting for
him. God emerges as the encompassing unity and “eternity that awaits” in “The Bright Field” (CP 302).

Accordingly, prayer – which is, for Thomas, more about communion than addressing an anthropomorphized listener – becomes not about preying on God but about being His “prey.” God reveals – or indeed conceals – Himself; we have no control over Him. Prayer is about being “made” God’s prey, being vulnerable and open to God’s self-revelation rather than actively, objectively, trying to know Him. The speaker suggests that he is therefore at God’s mercy, but for this he is grateful. Being God’s prey means that rather than delimiting God the speaker is open to the ways that He reveals Himself – specifically how God has been there all along as the deeper presence or unity that lies in wait “for all time.” This new attitude to God and prayer can be considered one answer to the question posed in “After the Lecture.” Prayer is about accepting a position as God’s prey for the negative capability, as well as the experience of God’s fullness.

This mercy – or compassion – is more complicated than the poem’s opening suggests. Ostensibly, God is “the most / compassionate of raptors” because He reveals Himself, redeeming the emptiness of a world in which “acceleration” is otherwise “the rule.” In that fast-changing world, meaning and worth are measured differently, their emphasis on speed and scientific advancement standing in stark contrast to the timelessness offered by God. Implicitly, whether driven away from God, or in desperate pursuit of their idea of Him, people fail to be still and recognize the pearl of great price that is here. On the other hand, God stops the speaker and holds him fast as His prey.

The way God reveals Himself as “laid in wait / for” the speaker makes this even more consoling. The speaker suddenly realizes the fullness of God;
how He hovers out of sight, there but not there. When preyed upon, the
speaker realizes his unity with the eternal, discovering the “pearl” in the
“soul’s / shallows.” Indeed, the speaker realizes that he is God’s prey “for all
time” and the “prey / of for all time the most / compassionate of raptors,” as
though God, and the experience of God, is “all time.” God is the unity that is
always there, the “eternity that awaits.” Thomas suggests that God is always
waiting for us to come to Him, at which point He may suddenly strike and
reveal Himself – like the sun breaking through cloud in a field, or the raptor in
“Moorland” and “Raptor.” Thus, God is simultaneously raptorial and
compassionate, violent yet merciful, in the way that He awaits His seeker –
paradoxes which we have seen raptors repeatedly convey.

But God is also a compassionate raptor because He is predatory and in
charge of His revelation. God, therefore, cannot be delimited or “effete.” This
otherness and unknowability is, as the raptor image conveys, unnerving yet
eye-openingly relieving when to “lie in wait” for our idea of God would reveal
only His absence. Instead, God reveals Himself as a God who is not dictated by
our terms but rather, as the metaphor suggests, wild. The spiritual anguish of
knowing God “primarily for / his absence” is healed, ironically, by virtue of
Him being known as an absence, as an unknowable, hidden “raptor” who
preys on us. God’s absence and unknowability indicate His undelimited
agency rather than conformity, and thus His omnipotence. God’s wildness
opens up His presence. God’s otherness manifests His grace.

Thus the poem’s ending leads back to its beginning. As Thomas’s line-
breaks enigmatically suggest, the speaker is also grateful that God comes “not
always / nor often” – grateful, in other words, for God’s absence. Indeed,
when God comes the speaker realizes that the God he lay in wait for, as though
absent, was “laid in wait / for him.” When God comes the speaker perceives the absence as like a presence, similar to the birdwatcher-priest in “Sea-watching.” God’s presence, in turn, is like an absence – not a discrete, objectifiable being but, as the links to “The Bright Field” suggest, the eternal ground of the speaker’s being. God’s absence is therefore not simply the norm but the primary way in which the speaker knows Him. The speaker is grateful for this because it is how he then knows God’s presence, the spiritual foundations of reality, and that absence to be an undelimited kind of presence. In more ways than one, there must be absence before there can be presence; absence is an essential part of the experience of God.

Moreover, the experience of nothing – or absence – as we noted earlier, is the spiritual experience of ultimate reality, and it is to this that the speaker gratefully seems to allude. The speaker’s experience therefore reflects that spiritual “prerogative” of being “in hell,” and how that discomfort and vulnerability is ultimately edifying, assuring him of the greater spiritual unity, and of his unity with it. The speaker understands that absence and silence are characteristic of God – how He is primarily known – and this means that the speaker can only be open to the self-revealing of God.

In “The Indians and the Elephant” (CLP 252) Thomas again embraces the irreducible nature and presence of God. In the Hindu parable, blind Indians attempt to describe and conceptualize an elephant, comparing the unknown to what they do know. Naturally, their confusion is great: they each encounter different parts of the elephant, drawing different conclusions about what it is “like” while being unable to form a complete picture of it. The speaker finds in this parable a partial analogy for his own encounters with God: though he is “not blind” he has to similarly “feel my way / about God,
exploring him / in darkness.” But where the Indians “encounter[]” and
“discover[]” the elephant in different ways, unable to conceive of how it is all
those things (and none of them), the speaker “feel[s]” his way, “exploring”
God “in darkness” both necessarily and deliberately. The speaker is open to
the many and diverse ways that God reveals Himself, and the emphasis is, of
course, on a different kind of groping in the dark – an intuitive, religious

*feeling* rather than knowing. Just as the elephant’s trunk and tail are indeed
“like a tree” or “rope,” God is like many things, an unknown composite of
experiences. As for the Indians (though they miss the deeper unity), our
knowledge of God consists of diverse, individual encounters with Him, and in
this more disorienting context it is not a question of who is right or who is
closest. God is not static, not even tangible, but an unconscious understanding
that the speaker tries to translate into conscious ideas.

The speaker turns to biblical and elemental metaphors to describe his
aggregate experience of God:

> Sometimes he is
> a wind, carrying me off;
> sometimes a fire devouring
> me. Rarely, too rarely
> he is as the scent
> at the heart of a great flower
> I lean over and fall
> into.

This abundance of experiences does not pigeonhole or restrict God, nor
is it a source of dispute, but rather it reflects how the speaker is “not blind” to
the truth that “always he surrounds / me.” The speaker relies on metaphor to
express his inexpressible, abstract sense of God and how He enwraps him in mystery. God is like all these things for the speaker, rather than one concrete thing or the other. The ultimate being of God, though, like the elephant, remains unfathomable. This is poiesis in action: the speaker implicitly acknowledges and embraces the wild otherness and undelimited being of God through his litany of metaphors. Indeed, the endless ways in which God preys upon the speaker’s imagination – rather than being preyed upon – are evoked not only in the imagery of disorienting and consuming rapture but the stream of metaphors expressive of a God that the speaker cannot lay hold of.

Nevertheless, the speaker asserts that:

always he surrounds
me, mostly as a cloud
lowering, but one through which
suddenly light will strike,
burnishing the cross
waiting on me with spread wings
like the fiercest of raptors.

Thomas returns to the raptor as he attempts to convey the God that is “always” there; ubiquitous and irreducible. As the “fiercest of raptors,” God is implicitly lordly and indomitable, ruthless and turbulent, and marked by extreme violence and energy. However, God also “burnish[es] the cross” and waits on the speaker “with spread wings,” so that Thomas’s closing image holds these tensions together as all part of the wild otherness of God.

Indeed, when God strikes it seems both violent and compassionate. God burnishes the cross, making it new and vital and perhaps reminding the speaker of the sacramental love and violence at the heart of His being and our
existence. The reference to the Passion seems to reveal His compassion, which is reinforced by the final metaphor on which the poem hangs. The poem’s emphasis is that God is always there, and thus like a protective, attentive, and patient raptor, God does not lie in “wait / for” the speaker, as in “Prey,” but “wait[s] on” him. The poem also suggests that it is finally through the cross that the speaker best knows God. It may also be the cross’s “spread wings” that wait on the speaker like a raptor, indicating God’s fierce love and the sacramental act that is made available for the speaker.

Once again it is through raptors that the unknowability of God becomes reassuring. Where the elephant parable typically exposes the inadequacy and absurdity of the Indians’ attempts – and the partial, subjective nature of truth – the poem suggests that it is in our subjective, partial experiences of God that we can discover His multifarious, encompassing nature and thus find a unifying truth. The closing image, especially with its expansive “spread wings” and return to Thomas’s most familiar conceptualization of God, seems to welcome such an understanding. This unifying, unrestrictive truth may be Thomas Aquinas’s belief that God reveals Himself, in the poet’s words, “according to the creature’s ability to receive Him” (A 106). The way God reveals Himself to R. S. Thomas – preying upon his mind, waiting for him, refusing to be preyed upon – is ultimately compassionate in its intensity. This is true even as God waits for the speaker to “surrender,” as Christopher Morgan writes, to the “terrifying experience of a deity which is without boundary and beyond control” (117).
Chapter 6: In search of Rhiannon’s birds

Suddenly the Teutonic swear of a low-flying fighter jet tears across the flow of a prayer, spitting on the embrace of memory. It is then that a few of RS’s favourite characters sing their arrival at the sunlit porch, whetting a blade of our culture through the shadows of the yews.

Myrddin ap Dafydd, “Like a Lullaby” (in David Lloyd, ed. Imagined Greetings)

The search for Rhiannon’s birds and their everyday counterparts is fundamental to R. S. Thomas’s ecological nationalism. These mythological birds from the Mabinogion are representative of Wales and the timeless, eternal foundations of the earth which Wales embodies in Thomas’s writing. As he notes, these birds “made the listener forget time” (And the Tale Ran Thus 5) and, in the poem “Maes-yr-Onnen” (CP 24), birds sing up the material and spiritual unity of being as the speaker contemplates an old Nonconformist chapel. “Up in the rafters, where the bell should ring” the speaker hears “The wild, sweet singing of Rhiannon’s birds.” Here Thomas “realised there was really no such thing as time, no beginning and no end but that everything is a fountain welling up endlessly from immortal God” (Prose 44).

In Thomas’s writing, such birds and the awareness they enable stand against the Machine – that is, “England” and the techno-scientific
objectifying, capitalist-imperialist ways of looking at the world that England represents. As discussed, the Machine interrupts awareness of the unity of being. The enframing of the Machine, and its changes to traditional relationships with the land, distance the human from the earth and the material-spiritual unity in which we should, in the Heideggerian sense, “dwell.” For Thomas, these effects led to the Welshman’s displacement and disconnection from his environment, enabling the exploitation of Wales. This was also the loss of the non-mechanized, authentic unity with the earth that “Wales” represented. Thus, colonial problems are also ecological problems, stemming from the ways in which the Machine separates human and nature. As Damian Walford Davies notes, “technology appears as the enemy of an indigenous Welsh culture assailed by [an] alien and pernicious modern . . . Anglo-American cultural imperialism” (15). In “Afforestation” (CP 130), for instance, a commercial “population of trees” established by the British Forestry Commission “Colonis[es] the old / Haunts of men.” The ugly trees stand in “black crowds” that block “the sun’s way” and cheapen the Welsh landscape and culture. Their only use is for “Thin houses” and “Pages of pale trash” in the “cheap times” of “A world that has gone sour with spruce.”

This underlying focus on the unity of human and nature makes Thomas’s nationalism ecological when it could otherwise undermine environmentalism. Nationalism, for instance, can entail intolerance and, as Timothy Clark says of Heidegger’s infamous politics, lead “too easily to . . . racist conceptions of those held not to belong” (59). There is an element of this in “The Small Window” (CP 202), where Thomas states that the natural “wealth” of Wales is “for the few / And chosen.” His “near Biblical” phrasing, as Justin Wintle observes, damns the outsider “ab initio” from this Welsh
paradise on no basis other than “birth and provenance” (17). Yet Thomas’s nationalism is, as Kate Rigby and Jonathan Bate say of Heidegger, “far removed from an irrationalist cult of blood and soil” (Rigby, “Earth, World, Text” 432), especially given its emphasis on dwelling as a “commitment” not an exclusive privilege. Likewise, he focuses on nationalism as an “alternative” to “the dehumanization wrought by . . . technology . . . [and] mass industrialization” (Bate 269).

Moreover, Thomas’s nationalism is devoted to the land and a specific people because for him Wales is the “source of Welsh life” and the Kingdom of Heaven on earth:

Anyone who can feel for the life of the Welsh countryside has experienced something too strong and too profound to be ascribed to another world, or another life. Here, in the soil and the dirt and the peat do we find life and heaven and hell, and it is in these surroundings that a Welshman should forge his soul. When the Welsh as a nation were bound to this kind of life, then their souls were strong and deep. In the towns, especially the towns in England, what else awaits you but the spiritual? (Prose 47)

The preservation of Wales is therefore more than nationally important. The material and spiritual are connected here in a powerfully patriotic way. As in Thomas’s “Abercuawg” lecture, the environmental, spiritual, and national are combined. Abercuawg – his ideal Wales – is a spiritual ideal, a state of being and unity but also the potential that lies in Wales, a “place of trees and fields and flowers and bright unpolluted streams, where the cuckoos continue to sing” (Prose 158). Wales is both real and an ideal that is/has yet to be realized.
It is the embodiment of “not-England,” the real world that the world of the Machine must become re-acquainted with rather than looking beyond the material world for meaning. Thomas’s nationalism therefore tends toward an eco-spiritual vision which unifies his work and allows his nationalism to be seen in an ecological light.

Indeed, in *A Year in Llŷn*, as Thomas reflects upon his experience with the goldcrests, he ponders how the “implications of lack of faith in God and eternal life” are “total extinction for us and our loved ones” (*A* 144). Thus, against the effects of “modern technology” he “turned increasingly to birdwatching,” waiting for his sublime vision of God as he waited “for a migrant bird.” His focus on the eternity to be found in nature and the spiritual-material relationship between (Welsh)man and earth, and on the colonization of Wales as a threat to this, render his nationalism part of a larger eco-spiritual vision.

But as Timothy Morton notes, the idea of nation “all too often depends upon the very same list that evokes the idea of nature,” which has a “potentially infinite” number of anthropocentric meanings – political, cultural, aesthetic, and so forth – that “smudge[]” what we really need to attend to, what a nation truly depends and grounds itself upon (*Ecology Without Nature* 14-15). In other words, nationalism conceals the presence and self-disclosing of the natural world behind values and ideas that get in the way of ecological thinking. Having developed out of an era of rapid expansion in industry, empire, and capitalism, as Morton explains (92), romantic nationalism which posits nature as an alternative to industrialism and capitalism is encoded with the capitalist and consumerist language of that time. Moreover, such thinking sets up the idea of nations as separate places.
Ironically, this sustains imperialist ideas of nature not as “here” but “over there” and thus open to exploitation. Moreover, when the environment does not stop at or divide itself along geopolitical lines, the idea of the nation may foster insular rather than global ways of thinking about and relating to the earth. As Morton suggests, to instead think in terms of one place – the ecosphere – would be to challenge imperialist capitalism, contemplate our immersion in the world, and so be less likely to destroy it (64).

Thomas encourages this in his “Wales” poems, focusing on the relationship between human and nature as a way of reflecting upon the relationship between the Welshman and Wales and how national issues are ecological ones. The poiesis of birdwatching plays an important role in envisioning this unity. Birdwatching involves openness to the self-disclosing of the natural world; it is that “bringing-forth” which does not enframe things but lets “what is not yet present,” or concealed, “arrive into presencing” or “unconcealment” (Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” 317). Birdwatching becomes a way to see beyond the world of the Machine to the spiritual and material unity in which humankind dwells and which Wales embodies.

Thomas turns to birds as a conscious shift away from the self-destructive consciousness fostered by England and the Machine. Indeed, Thomas even links his initial interest in birdwatching to the realization that the Welsh “rural way of life, which I had partly romanticised, no longer existed” (“Birding” 9). Though he “could no longer apprehend a living folk culture,” he explains, he could at least “witness and enjoy an avian existence which had hardly changed over vast periods of time, and which remained beautiful and free.” When modern life is about continuous progress driven by
a sense of time running out, birds offer a different clock to live by: the eternal continuity of their seasonal migrations. Birds are “heralds on the quest for eternity,” Tim McKenzie writes, noting that Thomas “seems to be aligning his [poetic] project with Eliot’s attempt to move beyond the reach of earthly time” (42). Like Rhiannon’s birds, Thomas’s are linked to “the suspension of time” in a world that “lies beyond time, where the values of Thomas’s ideal Wales can come to life.” Birds rally the Welsh to a national and eco-spiritual cause. In one poem about the Welsh hero Owain Glyndŵr, all of Wales resists the English threat to its culture:

Beasts gave tongue and barn-owls hooted,
Every branch grew loud
With the menace of the crowd,
That thronged the dark, huge as a thundercloud. (“The Rising of Glyndwr,” *CP* 6)

And in a related poem, at a time of cultural integrity and unity with the natural environment of Wales,

For one brief hour the summer came
... and we heard

In the green shade Rhiannon’s birds

Singing tirelessly[.] (“The Tree,” *CP* 32–33)

Thomas therefore encourages birdwatching as a matter of eco-national importance. Birdwatching forms a poietic, politicized response to the effects of English colonialism that focuses on recovering a sense of unity between human and nature, Welshman and nation. The call to birdwatching in his prose writing attempts to cultivate awareness of place and a deeper, spiritual unity with the earth. “Bardic” birds also frequent his poetry, calling the Welsh
farmer to an authentic connection with his environment. These birds, Thomas’s natural-world counterparts, embody the self-disclosing of the land against its silencing and enframing by the Machine, opposing the encroachment of English techno-industrialist culture. They issue a call to resist the colonization of the farm, Thomas’s microcosm for Wales in which he explores the ecological and national effects of the Machine.

Nevertheless, one should not overlook what Thomas views as the urgent necessity of his nationalism for its own sake. As he says, reflecting on the media’s portrayal of his support for the Welsh nationalist group Meibion Glyndwr and their burning of English holiday homes in Wales in the eighties:

We have to be on the defensive in Wales because we are a small country . . . living alongside an English nation of 55 million people. When we talk about the death of one English person, we mean a physical death. But Christ said, ‘Don’t fear those that have the power to destroy the body, fear those that have the power to destroy both the body and the soul.’ And when you’re dealing with a nation, you’re dealing with a spiritual concept, and there’s no doubt that the soul of Wales, the identity of Wales, have been eroded and are being eroded further all the time. (“R. S. Thomas” 14)

Wales is a nation “fighting for its survival” (Prose 47). This is important in itself when, as Thomas says, the argument against nationalism is an “English” one, and “there is no better example of nationalism than the English people and the English language” (“Unity” 39). But of course, Welsh nationalism is even more important since Wales embodies a way of life which allows access to “ultimate reality” through the imagination, standing against Anglicization
(that is, the influence of the colonial-industrial Machine in making Wales another “English” province, in its appearance and ethos) and all that it represents. Wales is a spiritual concept which goes beyond a political identity even as Thomas lays claim to the nation as the incarnation of his “green” ethos. Birds, as we will see, evoke the rural world of imaginative and spiritual aliveness that is “Wales.”

**A Year in Llŷn**

As if to show how birdwatching can incorporate an eco-political response, Thomas wrote his Welsh birdwatching memoir *A Year in Llŷn* (1990). Despite its title, the memoir chronicles his month-to-month life in Llŷn for more than the space of a year. From the late eighties onwards, Thomas splices together domestic and international political events from the local and personal to the global.26 It is as though dates are irrelevant; all around the birdwatcher swirls the edifying, timeless world of nature, juxtaposed with the world of humankind hastily moving towards ecological crisis. Sparrowhawks open and close the text, for instance, engaged in creating new life and then “sharpening” their beaks for the “feast” from which new life comes. Meanwhile, in the human world the threat of nuclear apocalypse and the end of life looms. Against this, Thomas cultivates the awareness of place and the human connection to it needed to preserve Wales and the earth. As John Barnie notes, *A Year in Llŷn* “probes the nature of reality and what it is

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26 As Barnie explains, *A Year in Llŷn* is “a distillation of many years lived in Llŷn.” Thomas refers, for instance, to the assassination of Olof Palme in 1986 as happening “yesterday” (A 124), before alluding to the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) in November.
to be human, both as a general phenomenon, and as the ‘I’ living out its imperfect existence” (“The Candle in the Window” 68). The journal-like form enables Thomas to turn the self-reflective lens of memoir to the story of a life lived with and according to nature. Thomas opens up the changing sights, sounds, and character of the Llŷn Peninsula as, like a Welsh Gilbert White, he creates the portrait of a specific place.

The character of Llŷn was gradually being erased by the effects of colonialism. Stopping his car on the side of a busy road to watch “the light colouring the clouds around the mountains of Snowdonia” (A 125), Thomas describes “the silence that used to fall on my spirit every time I looked at them when I was younger.” But now no one stops to marvel or share in this spiritual moment. Thus, Thomas feels “more certain than ever that man’s discovery of the machine with all its consequences was a mistake.” Cars rush by “as if there wasn’t a minute to lose” and, “as if to emphasize” the colonial effect, “two little girls went by on their bicycles, cackling the patois of the big English towns.”

It is Thomas’s aim to cultivate awareness, appreciation, and particularly care – a word related to “dwelling” which Richard Kerridge says encompasses “feeling and action as well as awareness” (“Ecocritical Approaches” 363). Kerridge notes that the current “social predicament” when it comes to the environment is not “a lack of knowledge but . . . a disconnection between what we know and how we act.” It is significant, therefore, that Thomas was drawn to the genuine, personal tone of nature writing rather than to diatribe. He also exploits the contemporary appeal of that genre – and how this is, ironically, a symptom of that growing disconnection from nature. To cultivate such care for a place is to cultivate a protective patriotism for it and its importance to one’s being and identity.
Thomas links colonialism to the loss of awareness and subsequent “decay” of the land, to the abandoned smallholdings of Welshmen driven out by industrialization. Such ruins are “a symbol of what is happening to Wales” (A 169) while a badger hit by a car is symbolic of the old Wales. “There’s no room for his kind in today’s world,” Thomas remarks, “any more than there is for a Welsh-speaking Welshman in the heart of the countryside.” The new generations “have no love of the countryside, of Wales, or of art” (122), preferring the modern Anglicized world.

In response Thomas turns “back to the birds again” (A 132) and to a different awareness informed by their way of living “without taxing the resources of the environment.” As a birdwatching journal, A Year in Llŷn promotes the birdwatcher’s philosophy of keeping your eyes open. This consciousness of the seasonal cycle and meticulous recording of migration patterns means that one always finds nature has something of interest to offer. “I never thought there was much to August until I became a birdwatcher” (A 149), he writes.

Birds offer a sense of place and belonging which counters the placelessness that follows colonialism. A Year in Llŷn is a testament to nature’s keeping of time and balance; each month’s character is expressed in natural terms and the journal’s seasonal progression emphasises a sense of place and natural continuity. Applauding the year’s first chiffchaff, Thomas admires nature’s way of keeping time:

> every year it affords me an opportunity to marvel at the old and new miracle of this bodikin accomplishing the task of flying thousands of miles from Africa to Wales to raise a new
generation that will do the same thing when their time comes. (A 126)

“In August,” he writes,

the migratory birds start their passage . . . The waders start on their journey south in this month. As early as the second day, I have seen the green sandpiper on the edge of Tŷ Mawr pool, and no sooner does the last whimbrel pass by on its way north, than the first one of the autumn is on its way south. Nature never loiters. (148)

Against this Thomas sets human activity: “The birds crave mobility the same as the motorists, but less expensively, with a more melodious cry, and less dangerously.” As goldcrests, robins and chaffinches sing in February, he also reflects that “[t]his is nature responding to the promise of the spring, as it has done since time immemorial. What have we done to the earth?” (120).

Thomas suggests that environmental destruction is a result of man’s assumption that he exists outside of the natural temporal order. The motorists hurry on, oblivious to their being-in-the-world. Society is unable to stop and be in the spaces between its destinations. Eternity, meaning, and worth lie ahead in a manmade future rather than in the natural world. The awareness fostered by the Machine displaces nature, literally putting a road through the countryside and reducing it to something one merely passes through. This ignorance is dangerous. In an unpublished poem held at Bangor University, motorists are on their way to the ominous “lighted cities / that are the hanging gardens / of our culture” (“Motorway”). Thomas often links the Welsh with the Hebrews of the Old Testament (“The Small Window” is an example) and here the allusion to Babylon evokes the oppression of one nation by another –
as well as the hanging ground of humanity. This eco-national concern goes
back to the Welsh farmer’s obliviousness to his natural environment in poems
like “Cynddylan on a Tractor.” There the farmer, lured by the status and
efficiency of the tractor, becomes a mere mechanism of the industrialized
culture invading the Welsh countryside.

Birds are therefore important for offering a road to the sublime and
eternal in nature – a deeper sense of place and eco-spiritual unity. As
discussed earlier, Thomas’s religious thought is unorthodox and in A Year in
Llyn his Gaian Spirituality is on display. Thomas alludes to his nature
mysticism and non-transcendent sense of unity with Creation. “I am
thankful,” he notes, re-emphasizing his belief in the eternal foundations of the
natural world,

that I can still hear the dear sounds of the birds and the
creatures, and see the delightful sights of this earth. The saints
long ago would try to turn away from loving the visible world too
much. I confess that I am guilty of this. And yet I tend to
vindicate myself by saying that I have not loved it for its own
sake, but as part of God’s creation. (A 169)

When goldcrests surround him in an autumnal thicket he feels connected to
their “infinite,” “immemorial rhythm” for a timeless moment (“A Thicket in
Lleyn” 96). “It is moments like these that remain in the memory and . . . repay
you for the trouble of setting about knowing and understanding nature,” he
reflects (A 144). As Barnie explains, Thomas’s solitary moments of unexpected
rapture in the natural world come “close at times to the mystical, or at least
something elusive and timeless” (“The Candle in the Window” 68). In his
encounter with the goldcrests he feels restfully connected to the spiritual and
material processes of life. Through the endless passage of the seasons and the recurring migrations of the birds, Thomas evokes the eternity in nature.

*A Year in Llŷn* places human being within this ecocosmic picture while counterpointing this with the ignorant and rapid march of civilization and “progress” towards its end. Through the seasonal structure of the memoir, Thomas affirms the power of life and the hope that lies in nature as “eternally new” – no doubt against the severance from this which has reached its ultimate expression in manmade climate change and the nuclear warhead.

The birds have started to sing. The song thrush is at it from time to time, and the goldcrest. Nature can’t wait, even though there are rough times between us and the spring. . . . Life is stronger than death. (A 118)

Nevertheless, this optimism, Thomas suggests, depends upon humanity escaping the false consciousness of the Machine. “For millions of years,” he writes,

the earth has kept the balance, and it is only in our period of history, and specifically towards the close of the present century, that we have started to see how man in his blindness and greed is endangering the earth’s future. Some consider it already too late. Only time will tell. (170)

**Ornithology – What About It?**

The awareness Thomas encourage in his memoir is the result of decades of active birdwatching as well as of reflections on this hobby in relation to national concerns. A sense of place was an important national issue
from the beginning of his career. In his early parishes there was at times a
deficit of this and so, as the landscape was being colonized by the Machine and
“the birds of Rhiannon / . . . refus[ed] to sing” ("Deprivation," CP 469), he
sought the “true” Wales through birdwatching. Subsequently, in a series of
essays birdwatching became a national imperative.

In “Birds of the Parishes,” a short Welsh article published in 1945 in a
regular newsletter produced by the Anglican Church in Wales, Thomas
surprisingly chooses as his topic the avian side to life in Wales’s country
parishes.27 He urges his colleagues to “take advantage of the injunction of
Jesus: ‘Consider the birds.’” He directs their attention from the parochial (pun
intended) to the wider ambit of their pastoral care – the “part of the parish
that few knew,” as he puts it in “The Parish” (CP 101). The birds are their other
“feathered parishioners” who “sing God’s praise day after day” (“Birds of the
Parishes”). As in his poetry, the goal may be to awaken a spiritual sense of
place like that of the farmer in “Affinity” who, listening to “God’s choir /
Scatter their praises” in the woods, has “the world for church” (CP 8). As
Thomas notes in A Year in Llŷn and “The Minister,” Protestantism tends to
otherwise neglect the material, created world. Jesus’s “injunction,” however,
registers the importance of nature to faith, and the grace to be found in the
quotidian. Thomas’s article also delivers an enthusiastic call to birdwatching
as a means of daily enrichment which cultivates a sense of place. He implies
that this might help his readers fulfil their duties and find their way in Wales’s
rural communities, as it did for him.

27 This translation and others in this chapter were provided by Tony Brown in personal
correspondence.
As Patrick Crotty writes of “The Minister,” “Thomas’s parish . . . stands for the nation” (146) and this observation is true of the essay too. “This is our natural heritage,” Thomas asserts, as he asks his fellow parsons to look up and see the greater community of which they are a part (“Birds of the Parishes”). Thus he includes a note about the ways in which colonial and ecological issues are intertwined:

Wales has suffered from being too small and too close to England, and many birds which prospered in our country half a century ago have completely vanished by now, because of the increase in industry and population. (“Birds of the Parishes”)

Birdwatching is about taking stock, treasuring, and resisting the effects of colonialism in the understanding that national identity depends upon preserving what natural “heritage” remains – such as the “last kites in Europe,” found in the Black Mountains of Breconshire. Thomas suggests that by destroying local environments colonialism destroys the distinct awareness of place and cultural identity by which a nation defines itself. “[I]mperialism,” as Jonathan Bate says, “has always been accompanied by ecological exploitation” (100). Thus, an awareness of the interdependence of nature and culture is crucial.

On that note, such essays and their culmination in *A Year in Llŷn* reflect Thomas’s attempt to rectify the lack of a distinctly Welsh parson-naturalist tradition and so nurture a defining sense of place, as Francis Kilvert and Gilbert White, for instance, fostered in England. Thus, in “Adar y Gaeaf” (“Birds of the Winter”), a follow-up essay published in December of the same year, he writes a kind of local “country diary” column, offering a wintery view from his small parish that interweaves the worlds of nature and man. He
evokes the mystery and magic of “cohorts of . . . feathered creatures” flying black against a grey sky, reminding him of a time when natural processes held mystical meaning: “[i]t is not strange that the old people saw some significance in the birds, and these so numerous and free in the paths of the heavens.” As if to emphasize other cultural connections to place, he notes the tawny owl who “has been hooting in our trees for many centuries” and who comes “of the same race as the owl of Cwm Cowlyd,” the oldest creature in Wales. This link to the *Mabinogion* calls to mind a landscape rich in mythic significance, continuity, and mystery, carving out a distinct cultural space for the nation.

Thomas also attempts to make birds part of his readers’ lives through a sense of camaraderie in the hard winter months. The reader’s attention is directed to the birds around him which – especially at this time – go unnoticed. Thomas recognizes that this may not be the best time for birdwatching but rejects the notion that “there is nothing to see.” Visitors from Northern Europe still provide variety and interest when the world seems bare. Because this vignette calls forth the discrete, hidden forms of life in the landscape, promoting poetics of openness to the self-revealing of the natural world, one might call this a kind of poiesis.

Thomas also reflects upon the birds that travel all this way only to be killed “like some soldier from Wales who died in some alien/strange land.” This unexpected comparison links the fates of bird and soldier as the birdwatcher remembers, in 1945, Wales’s own brave migrants. There is a sense of waste and bitterness about those Welsh soldiers in service to the British army. The comparison arouses compassion for the birds, provokes identification with them, and provides an occasion for national solidarity. The
nature diary thus becomes a medium for cultural reflection. Three months after the official end of the Second World War, Thomas reflects upon winter, death, and the importance of home in more ways than one, placing the human world within nature’s cycles of life and death.

In “Gwahaniaethu” (“To Differentiate”), an “opinion piece” published in the Welsh weekly Y Faner in 1977, Thomas further encourages a Welsh birdwatching and naturalist movement. The ability to differentiate between similar species, he suggests, may not only afford the individual great pleasure (they may see a rare bird) but facilitate an important sense of place. This skill, moreover, is a mark of the scientific discipline that Thomas finds wanting in Wales. In light of great advances in ornithology he calls this a cultural “failure to keep up” and it is, subtly, a colonial issue.

Welshmen, he writes, “have been extremely unconcerned” with the natural sciences – ornithology, botany, and lepidoptery, in particular – and thus their natural heritage. Accordingly, as that environment has become reduced, the awareness of a distinct place has shrunk.

Every black bird is a crow of some particular size, as the birds who sing/cry ‘Cwac, cwac’ are all ducks. But in this country there are at least five members of the ‘crow’ family, namely the raven, the rook, the carrion crow, the red-legged crow, and the jackdaw, and it is not difficult to tell the difference between them.

This is a matter of not overlooking or reducing the many beings, and their unique self-presencing, which define one’s local sphere. This is a matter of being in the world in order to be in the nation.

Indeed, there is a sense that the Welsh inability to differentiate between birds reflects an inability to differentiate between Wales and England.
Moreover, such ignorance separates Wales from the “greatness of the early naturalists” and is reflective of the cultural effect of not having its own naturalist tradition. In “Adaryddiaeth–Beth Amdani?” (“Ornithology – What about it?”), an essay published in 1967 in Barn – a Welsh language magazine with connections to the Welsh nationalist movement – Thomas therefore considers the role ornithology could play in strengthening Welsh identity. As John Barnie notes, “[t]he lack of a Welsh ornithology is an expression of our client status” (“Beauty and Bread” 57).

Accordingly, Thomas asserts that Wales needs to get on board with “contemporary discoveries” and movements in order to define itself in the world (“Adaryddiaeth–Beth Amdani?”). A distinctly Welsh ornithological tradition would cultivate appreciation for Wales’s natural heritage and contribute to the international growth of that field. Significantly, he admits that “there is no room for nationalism in science” but that “through long and detailed study of nature as it appears in his own country many a scientist” may advance scientific knowledge. Regretful but grateful for the primarily English interest in Welsh birds and the establishment of sanctuaries and observatories, he encourages Welshmen to “realize the value and the pleasure that is to be had from birdwatching” in their land.

Birdwatching therefore becomes a politicized patriotic pursuit. As Thomas laments,

In the British Isles it is the English who are mainly interested in this subject, and they know about Welsh birds. How many times have I heard a Welsh countryman refer scornfully to the English who visit his obscure area simply because of the birds? How many times have I asked a Welsh person about the birds of their
country, but in vain every time?28 (“Adaryddiaeth–Beth Amdani?”)

He adds that,

Despite the efforts of the English, we are still short of enough observers in Wales. We know that thousands and hundreds of thousands of birds migrate through our countryside every year, and in their midst some very unfamiliar ones. But rarely is one of them reported by a Welshman. So often I have envied some Welsh farmer who is living along the edge of a lake or promontory in Wales, thinking of the opportunity that he has to see some unusual birds coming past. Unfortunately few of them know the birds well enough for that, and if they recognise them at all, then they know them by their English names.

As he explains in “Gwahaniaethu,” the skill of distinguishing birds is not only “part of the pleasure which is to be had from this activity” but it will be a triumph for Welsh ornithology:

Some day, perhaps, you will be lucky enough to realize that that song thrush you are looking at is not the same as the common song thrush; it is smaller for one thing and there is a patch of grey feathers under its eye. Gradually it will dawn on you that you are looking at a bird which comes all the way from the United States and that it is a grey-cheeked thrush. The next thing will be to describe it in accurate detail in your pocket book

28 Cf. “It worries him that more English people than Welsh appreciate the beauty of Wales. It is very disappointing that the English are on the whole more knowledgeable regarding the birds and flowers of our country than we ourselves. They are also readier to stand up for their language than is the greater number of our fellow Welsh” (A 104).
and, after going home and making sure that this is what it is, send the description to the panel of experts who are studying the type. If they like your description, they will accept the recording for publication and you can congratulate yourself for adding one more to the list of very unusual birds which has been seen in Wales this century. There is a considerable need in Wales for people with skill at differentiating in the field of birds as in many other fields. (“Gwahaniaethu”)

As he also affirms in “Adaryddiaeth,”

When we see Welsh-speaking Welshmen beginning to report . . . [the uncommon birds they see] consistently and seriously, we will feel that our beautiful little country will have the right to be considered an enlightened contemporary nation.

As encouragement, Thomas elsewhere mentions his greatest contribution to Welsh ornithology: the sighting of his “red-eyed vireo from the United States” in 1975 (“Adar Pen Lŷn”). According to Jon Gower this was Thomas’s “rarest bird,” the more remarkable for being “a tiny land bird about the size of a person’s thumb, storm-tossed at the tail end of the hurricane season right across the Atlantic” (76). Thomas’s sighting is listed in that September’s edition of *British Birds* (Dymond 354). As one source notes, there have only been three recorded sightings of this vagrant in Wales, including Thomas’s (Lovegrove et al. 329).

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29 The English translation of this essay’s title is “Birds of the Far End of Lleyn.”
30 Cf. Christie, D. A. 160. Nb. In “Adar Pen Lŷn” Thomas appears to give Porth Meudwy – a small cove at the tip of the Lŷn Peninsula, just around the corner from Aberdaron – as the specific location. In all the records cited, though, “Aberdaron” is given, which is the encompassing parish.
However, as he suggests in “Adaryddiaeth,” the problem is the lack of a natural education and the priorities with which the new generations have grown up, taught as they are in English. In the face of modernity, Thomas argues that the country’s economic development should not be at the expense of one’s culture and traditions. By turning its “back” on “knowledge of nature . . . [as] an essential part” of education, he writes, “two generations were brought up without any interest in the world of nature and without knowing how to live any longer in the heart of the countryside” (“Adaryddiaeth”). As shown earlier, he asserts the importance of being “educated in how to appreciate nature” in *A Year in Llŷn* (A 121), further linking nationalism with environmental consciousness. The long-term effect, Thomas warns, can otherwise be seen in parts of England where environmental loss was registered too late:

Some of the people of the large English towns were the first to see their loss, and they it is who come to Wales most often on the scent of the things which have been lost, the birds and the flowers and the animals. (“Adaryddiaeth”) It is for this reason that Thomas insists that to live a “full life” in the countryside and cultivate cultural identity “it is essential . . . to know as much as is possible about it” (“Adaryddiaeth”). This means knowing the “abundance of Welsh names for birds and flowers” – the loss of which due to an “imposed education system,” as Barnie notes, has “taught us provinciality” (“Beauty and Bread” 57) and contributed to a sense of placelessness and disengagement. By contrast, after talking about the peregrine falcon with a shepherd, Thomas says “it was a lovely experience to hear on his lips a name which was as old as the Welsh language” (“Adaryddiaeth”). This was like a re-flowering of Welsh
culture in a place where “[e]very mountain and stream, every farm and lane announces to the world that landscape is something different in Wales” (“Unity” 41).

Indeed, the absence of a strong Welsh naturalist tradition and the result of Welsh apathy towards the national environment are exacerbated by the matter of language. As Barnie explains, in a strong, “rounded” culture “ornithology would have a definite place and . . . be accessible through that culture’s language” (“Beauty and Bread” 57). However, the availability of only English words to describe that environment means the lack of a Welsh awareness of it, of how a place reveals itself in the language that has grown up around and out of it, and of the links between nature and culture. Furthermore, accepting a language that is not only culturally but ecologically distanced from Wales would reinforce the division of nature and man. For Thomas this therefore requires asserting the primacy of nature – that is, how culture depends on it – rather than fostering the idea that nature (and Wales) is separate from human culture and that it is what “we” and human enframing make it. The enframing of the national environment in the terms of an outsider language – one that is associated with the Machine – would be the enframing of nature too. This reinforces how colonialism works by erasing a sense of place and traditional cultural relationships with the land. Indeed, as Thomas notes, “England, or America” – with whom he associates the Machine – is for the new generations “the mediator of this new world” (A 114-115, emphasis added). Thus, refusing the colonizers’ language and its values of “getting on in the world” (“Adaryddiaeth–Beth Amdani?”) is crucial to closing the growing gap between Welshmen and Wales. Using the native language is one way of pushing back and regaining, in Barnie’s words, “the world of
nature so that it is seen through Welsh eyes” (“Beauty and Bread” 57). Culture is language, but because language is deeply rooted in the landscape, culture is also nature and birdwatching is the point at which they come together. For these reasons, Thomas “set about learning Welsh” himself in order to return to the “true Wales” (A 10). Although, to his great regret, he could never write poetry in Welsh, his proficiency with the language, and use of it in birdwatching, provided a way in to the cultural and natural heart of his homeland. In this way, birdwatching in the language that has grown out of a place might be seen as an eco-national instance of poiesis.

Therefore Thomas politicizes his hobby, urging Welsh birdwatchers to connect with the places in which they live by using the local language. “[E]very Welshman who claims he knows something about birds,” he asserts in “Gwahaniaethu,” should have the “List of the Birds of Wales . . . along with a good handbook.”31 This is essential to establishing a distinctly Welsh ornithological tradition and sense of place, and the availability of Welsh bird names leaves no excuse. Thomas’s birdwatching notebook eventually bears witness to this politicization of birdwatching, recording the names of migrants exclusively in Welsh from 1985 onwards.32 His commitment to birdwatching in the local tongue and declaring Wales’s right to name and orientate itself in its landscape is further reflected in his copy of the Peterson Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe. Next to many of the entries listed therein, he records the birds’ Welsh names.33 He also includes a glossary of forty-three

31 The former Welsh-language index, he notes, is “published by the National Museum of Wales,” from the work of the Welsh ornithologists E. V. Breeze Jones and Peter Hope Jones – which can be found in Thomas’s personal library, now held at Bangor University.
32 Details for this follow in the next section.
33 This can be found in the collection of Thomas’s personal books at the Bangor University R. S. Thomas Centre.
birds’ names at the end of *A Year in Llŷn*, in Welsh, Latin, and English, to assist his Welsh readers. This is not simply to translate but to reinstate these words in their lexicon and encourage birdwatching in Welsh as a patriotic act. As Thomas points out in the memoir, “if you have lost the habit of reading Welsh, or following some subject like bird-watching through the medium of Welsh, what function is left to the language?” (A 162). The glossary, as Jason Walford Davies also suggests in his introduction to the *Autobiographies*, bestows greater linguistic power and responsiveness to Welsh at a time when the dominance of English has seen many of the capabilities of the old language fall into disuse. It also makes the need for greater awareness of the earth an ecological and national issue. Thomas’s “point about our responsibility to recognise our fellow inhabitants on earth is perfectly serious, and is what justifies the trilingual glossary” (A xxx-xxxi).

**The Welsh Birdwatcher**

But how did Thomas’s call to birdwatching translate into eco-national praxis? What is the practical side to the poiesis of birdwatching and its bringing forth of nature and nation? How is birdwatching the nexus of Thomas’s nationalism and environmentalism?

In 1949, while he was living in Manafon, Thomas began recording the migration patterns of summer migrants in a brown notebook that is now held in the archives of Bangor University. Usually between late March and May, he headed up a page with the year and listed by date the species that arrived and the location in which he sighted them. Thomas religiously followed these patterns for almost fifty years, his last list being that for 1997 – three years
before his death and by which time he had returned “full circle” to his childhood home of Anglesey. This obsessive, punctual commitment to ornithology demonstrates the attunement to place and time that Thomas calls for in his writing. As in *A Year in Llŷn*, his interest in migration patterns reflects how he set his watch to the rhythms of the natural world. The chiffchaffs would be first in March and the swifts last in May, and for the arrival of each species one might imagine Thomas, as he says, “on tenterhooks, longing to have knowledge of what was around” (“Adar Pen Llŷn”).

This “Bird Book” offers another way to frame Thomas’s quest for the “true Wales of my imagination” (*A 10*) and thus the close alignment of birdwatching and nationalism. The notebook – which charts Thomas’s career from parish to parish, further and further into the cultural heart of Wales – suggests how, at least in part, his “hiraeth” (a Welsh word which encompasses longing, homesickness, nostalgia, and grief for what has been lost) for his ideal Wales is linked to birdwatching. While studies of Thomas typically trace his migrations in terms of his desire to reach the heart of Welsh-speaking Wales, the Bird Book bears witness to the undeniable role that birds played in that search. Accordingly, the book sheds light on the importance of birds to Thomas’s vision of Wales.

Thomas’s true Wales is not only Welsh-speaking but a place of communion with the natural world for itself and for the sake of the nation. Both were missing in Manafon, he notes glumly, where “Welsh wasn’t to be heard” (*A 10*) and the farmers were the materialistic products of a desperate existence increasingly altered by the colonial Machine. The situation was worse in Eglwysfach, where Thomas turned in 1954. Though an invitingly
“Welsh area in its appearance” (A 63), the Welsh language there was particularly “weak” (A 64) and an “English middle class” proved demoralizing with its “factions” and “snobbery, jealousy and love of money” (A 65). However, Thomas was initially drawn to the area by its vacant living at St. Michaels’ Church, and especially the birdlife recommended to him by the resident naturalist and nature correspondent for the Guardian William (Bill) Condry. The village’s proximity to the Dyfi estuary offered perfect birding prospects and, as Thomas writes, birds and the Wales of the Mabinogion became more intertwined:

his spirits were raised as he listened to the woodlark singing daily above the house. This is one of the most magical songs to be heard in Britain, and, listening to these melodious notes, there came to mind the Birds of Rhiannon and the old tale of how the listener would, on hearing them, forget time. (A 64)

In 1967 Thomas moved to Aberdaron on the tip of the Llyn Peninsula. Here the avian richness and natural integrity of Wales, and native language, were in tune. The Irish Sea – a major migration route for birds – and the nearby Bardsey Island bird reserve, which Thomas had already begun frequenting, made the area especially attractive. In more ways than one, the poet-birdwatcher’s only “business,” as he puts it in “The Place” (CP 207), was to have nature “about” him. Yet here also the true Wales was starkly under threat from the influence of the Machine.

Thomas’s Bird Book also bears testament to the wider range and ecological vision of his avian perambulations. Indeed, his interest in migrant birds suggests the birdwatcher’s familiarity with the way in which nature exceeds national boundaries and how the globe is intricately connected by
lines of flight. Thomas traced these lines around the British Isles and extending to Sweden, Switzerland, France, Spain (including Mallorca), Norway, Poland, Greece, Alaska, Canada, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Oman. In over twenty pages, Thomas records his “Life List” of all the birds he saw and recorded in these places. This may not be complete but it records an impressive 563 species. Thus, while the Bird Book is for the most part domestic, Thomas does not forget those birds beyond the nation.

Although Thomas never refers to himself as an ornithologist his list reveals how birdwatching was more than an amateur hobby. Indeed, he not only collected but contributed to the ornithological periodical *British Birds* and is listed therein as the new county recorder for Gwynedd in 1982 (Everett and Spencer 476). This role made him the authority on local sightings and identifications, and approving and collating local records. The periodical also acknowledges Thomas for his contributions to “Operation Seafarer,” which monitored the status of puffins between 1960 and 1970 (Harris 259). Some of Thomas’s rarest finds are also recorded herein: the grey-cheeked thrush that he found dead with Bill Condry and the ornithologist P. E. Davis (Smith 1972: 341); an American Bittern now preserved in the National Museum of Wales (Harber 278); the red-eyed vireo (Dymond 354); and the rose-coloured starling (Smith 1974: 336) which, upon discovering it amongst “a flock of ordinary starlings,” Thomas endearingly “hurried home to fetch my wife so that she, too, might see,” as he recalls in *A Year in Llŷn* (A 140). Thus, “Mrs M. E. Thomas” is also recorded in the *British Birds* entry. Of their prize Thomas writes, “that is how it is where birds are concerned. You can

34 Thomas held the role until at least 1986 (Everett and Prytherch 262).
never say with certainty, ‘I shan’t see anything today.’ . . . We are guilty of not looking up often enough” (A 140).

This message of environmental awareness, with its eco-national implications, finds expression in Thomas’s close involvement with Ynys-hir. Hubert Mappin, the ailing owner of the large estate on the banks of the Dyfi, near Eglwysfach, agreed to Thomas and Condry’s appeal to make his estate “a sanctuary with no permission for shooting over it” (AE 14). Within a week of his death, Mappin – a genuine conservationist – signed a covenant with the National Trust, speedily arranged by Thomas. This covenant “to safeguard the place against the worst forms of commercial exploitation” (Condry, *Pathway* 186), enabled Condry and Thomas to prevent another Welsh estate from “falling into the hands of developers and speculators” – something which Thomas laments in “Afforestation” (CP 130). These oak woods, Condry writes, “would not be felled and replaced by conifers,” as was happening “on so many estates.”

Thomas and Condry sought to preserve the natural character of the place and its cultural importance from the Machine’s invasion of Wales. “Ynys-hir with its woodlands, marshes and estuary,” Condry writes, “had retained a tranquillity and wild beauty now rare in a countryside steadily being degraded by conspicuous chalet parks, ill-concealed caravan sites and by houses and other buildings out of character in rural Wales” (*Pathway* 185). Thomas had previously written, of the colonialist appropriation of the Welsh landscape, that wild beauty was in danger of being commoditized and exploited. The romanticization of the Welsh landscape, he worried, engendered another form of imperialism which in turn brought change and disconnection from the real landscape that had long sustained the Welsh.
Wales was becoming merely a holiday destination to be consumed and polluted. “Seeing how Wales fares,” Thomas writes in one poem, with a sour financial pun,

I will attend rather
To things as they are: to green grass
That is not ours; to visitors
Buying us up. Thousands of mouths
Are emptying their waste speech
About us, and an Elsan culture
Threatens us. (“Looking at Sheep,” CP 151)

“Elsan” connects the poem to the menace of tourists and caravans, their portable waste systems signifying the threat of a consumerist culture and the detritus it leaves behind. The overwriting of Wales’s wild beauty – what Thomas calls, in “Welsh Landscape,” the “wild sky” with the “spilled blood” of past warriors that went into its “making” (CP 37) – is the overwriting of a distinct place and culture, and a history of resistance.

Three years later in 1969, with Thomas’s and Condry’s involvement, Ynys-hir was purchased by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), and Condry became the first warden of the new nature reserve.35 Condry’s remarks on the importance of such reserves re-emphasize the disconnect which is a national as well as ecological issue for Thomas. He stresses the value of wildness and natural autonomy in a world that “frame[s]” nature through “television screen[s]” (Pathway 188–89). At Ynys-hir the

35 In 2013 a new bird hide was opened on the reserve and dedicated to Thomas in celebration of “the historic connection between the reserve” and the poet (http://www.rspb.org.uk/news/details.aspx?id=355121). The interior of the hide is decorated with interpretative panels which depict extracts from his work.
birds are not “tame and amicable birds” that advance “from all sides” – as is expected in a “world increasingly littered with wildfowl collections, country zoos and safari parks” – but “just as keen on not being watched as they are in other places” – that is, in real life. In other words, Condry values a kind of poiesis: the self-disclosing of the natural world outside of society’s enframing devices. This involves “respect” for the mystical thing-in-itself, like that “with which . . . [one] would go into a church.” Condry’s image, which recalls Thomas’s poem “The Moor,” suggests the inextricable spirituality of wild places that is part of this poiesis – this interest in authentic being – while reminding one of his learned fondness for Henry David Thoreau.

For Thomas, the sacredness of the Welsh landscape and its spiritual authenticity is a national issue. The wild spirit of the Welsh countryside is linked to the wild independence of the Welsh consciousness. Ynys-hir was dedicated to preserving a picture of Welsh identity as much as preserving a specific environment. In resisting the colonization of nature, Thomas resisted the colonization of Wales. Such issues weighed heavily on the mind of the nation at this time. “Reservoirs” (CP 194), for instance – Thomas’s poem about Capel Celyn, the small village that was flooded in 1965 to provide another nation’s water – explores how environmental issues are colonial ones. By preventing the violation of Ynys-hir’s spiritual, natural integrity, Thomas prevented – in miniature – the enframing of Wales and the subjugation of the wild spirit of a people through the subjugation of their environment.

This is how colonialism works. In “A Welshman at St James’ Park” (CP 165) Thomas describes “birds / That have been seduced from wildness,” thinking back to “a Welsh hill / That is without fencing” and “the high pastures of the heart.” The comparison with Welshmen who have been enticed
by the trappings of empire – with connotations of passivity and of sexually selling-out – is clear. Thus, the speaker declares his independence from this domesticated world and abusive relationship:

I am invited to enter these gardens
As one of the public, and to conduct myself
In accordance with the regulations;
To keep off the grass and sample flowers
Without touching them; to admire birds
That have been seduced from wildness by
Bread they are pelted with.

I am not one
Of the public; I have come a long way
To realise it. Under the sun’s
Feathers are the sinews of stone,
The curved claws.

“I am not one” of these birds nor “one / Of the public,” the speaker asserts, for this place goes against his Welsh identity – which is implicitly linked to wildness and authenticity. Again, Wales is Nature, England is the world of the Machine. The gardens, with their bureaucratic “regulations,” evoke the modern Anglicized world in which nature is solely ornamental and objectified rather than immersive (no touching is allowed). Here the attractions and enticements of modern progress have seduced the homogenized “public” – like the birds – from its natural dignity and autonomy, “pelt[ing]” it with what it has become dependent on, dehumanizing it. Thus the speaker returns to his unfenced nation to escape the hidden “curved claws” of empire.
One might say that Thomas answered St. James Park with Ynys-hir. In the poem, the domestication of nature is framed as the domestication of the human (“public”) spirit – especially the wild Welsh spirit. Thomas sought to preserve wildness at Ynys-hir on the understanding of its essential and intrinsic link to Welsh identity and independence. The autonomy (and dignity) of the nation was tied to the autonomy of its landscape. Ynys-hir represented a Wales that had not been seduced by the allure of modern “progress.”

Furthermore, amidst this nationalism is a wider, ecological resistance to the Machine, such as Condry evinces. The poem fuses ecological and national issues, concerned with the domestication and concealing of nature that underlies colonialism. On that note, the poem is extended by “The Moor” (CP 166) which follows it in Pieta, the collection published in the same year that plans for Ynys-hir began. “The Moor” reveals the qualities of that Welsh hill and the more-than-national ideal which Thomas seeks. The spiritual communion that the landscape offers, with its air that “crumbled / And broke on me generously” as the Eucharistic “bread,” signifies a greater unity than that with the Welsh heartland. Thus, the matter of Wales is linked to Thomas’s thematic triad of nature, spirituality, and nation.

It is therefore surprising that in one matter Thomas’s nationalism conflicted with his environmentalism, evoking the insularism of nationalism and its advocacy of artificial boundaries. He and Condry were members of the Committee for the Protection of the Red Kite, an initiative which the poet joined upon moving to Eglwysfach. The kite’s absence from his moorland poetry may be symptomatic of its precarious status at that time when the Cambrian Mountains were its last refuge in Britain. Eventually, though,
through the efforts of the committee “the birds built up from only two or three pairs after the first World War to over a hundred birds on the wing by the 1970s,” as Thomas notes (AE 13). The kite volunteers monitored nesting sites to protect against an epidemic of egg collectors and bounty hunters. This also meant “going out and about the lower end of the country in April to find as many nests as possible, and keep a record of their progress.”\(^{36}\) Some of Thomas’s records can be found in his Bird Book where, from 1956 to 1967, he notes searches, sightings, locations (including grid references), flight routes, and egg or nestling numbers. These records indicate the extent of his commitment to an ecological and national issue. He admits, “[t]here was for me the added attraction that Wales was their only breeding area in Britain” (AE 13) so that perhaps he saw in the kite an allegory for the cultural distinctness that was also disappearing from the nation as a whole. Indeed, the birds were under threat from increasing industrialization and urbanization – effects of the colonial Machine. In his third-person autobiography No-one Thomas also remarks that when committee members spoke to local farmers “it was difficult for them to understand what you meant, until you used the English word ‘kite’” (A 67). Perhaps these cultural aspects became Thomas’s priority, or were so inseparable from the ecological that, later, he would not compromise on one for the other.

In the early nineties he highlighted the tensions between nationalism and environmentalism. Peter Davis, from the Welsh Kite Trust, explains:

> Much of . . . [Thomas’s] life and work was devoted to protesting the dilution of Welsh language and culture by the overwhelming

\(^{36}\) Cf. Autobiographies 66.
encroachment of outside influences, and the seeming
indifference of his compatriots. This was reflected in his final
involvement with Red Kite ‘politics’, when he wrote to the RSPB
resigning his membership, in protest over the decision to release
continental kites into England. . . . For the same reason, he
[later] felt obliged to ‘distance’ himself from the Welsh Kite
Trust, when I asked him to become a patron in January 1997.
‘We can no longer claim Wales as the last stronghold of the kite
in Britain, and doubtless there will be interbreeding before long’,
he wrote; and the integrity of the Welsh population was clearly a
matter of profound importance to him. (P. Davis 1)

In the politics of the environment nationalism can be problematic. While
Thomas’s argument was not ecologically unsound – as Davis notes, “[a] good
many bird-watchers of all nationalities agreed with him that the British Kite
should be allowed to continue its own natural recovery, without artificial
intervention” – his motives and principles call it into question. “[I]n Thomas’s
case there was an additional dimension,” Davis observes, “the re-introduction
was removing something unique from Wales.” As Thomas writes in No-one,
 “[a]s he roamed around Cardiganshire he became familiar with a new part of
Wales” (A 66). A “thrill would go through him every time one of these golden-red
birds arose from some trees.” Was he more concerned with the integrity of
the Welsh population of kites, and of a certain image of Wales as a home to be
defended, than the kites themselves? Perhaps in his preoccupation with the
idea of nation Thomas overwrote the autonomy of the bird itself, making it a
symbol of the nation. Conversely, perhaps human intervention would
overwrite that autonomy. Thomas no doubt sought to preserve what he saw as
the sacred, inviolate status of the Welsh landscape. As with Ynys-hir, he fought his battle against the “dilution” of Welsh culture from his own corner, in his own way. Maybe Thomas saw no distinction: fighting for Wales and Welsh kites was fighting for Nature in its ideal, authentic state, free from human interference. Nevertheless, the enormous success of the kite today is due to a solution – one can say with the benefit of hindsight – that he opposed.

After his retirement from the Church in 1978 Thomas became even more politically active. As his biographer Byron Rogers points out, these were Thomas’s “public years” (280). He was involved in a number of projects that blended environmental and national issues. As secretary and founding member of Cyfeillion Llŷn (The Friends of Lleyn) Thomas was committed, as Tony Brown explains, to defending “the Welsh language in Llŷn” and the local economy and environment (R. S. Thomas 93). He worked tirelessly with the Welsh Office, Welsh Language Board, local councils and MPs to further these interests. He also served as the first chairman of the Bardsey Trust Council, an organization dedicated to preserving the national, ecological, and spiritual importance of Bardsey Island. The Trust was established in 1979 with a successful appeal to buy the island from its private owner and protect it, like Ynys-hir, from commercial exploitation. Later, in 1986, the island became a national nature reserve. Thomas had been visiting Bardsey since 1953, when its bird observatory was established to monitor the status of rare migrants and breeding birds. The observatory’s secretary was William Condry.

Thomas’s involvement with Bardsey further illustrates the ecological implications of his nationalism. On Bardsey, life was close to the earth and the separation of human and nature nonsensical. The island’s tiny farming
community, and its relationship with the natural world represented a life free from the Machine and outside influence. As the Canon Donald Allchin remarks, Bardsey was “a place where people of our time can experience something of the rhythm, the demand and the beauty of a life not dominated by electricity and machines” (Evans 133). Life here was defined by the limitations and difficulties of the isolated landscape – perhaps even more than the Welsh hill country, where Thomas wrote of one farmer leaving the spiritual “discipline” of the mountains for his “swift undoing / In the indifferent streets” of the town (“Out of the Hills,” CP 1). Evidently, preserving Bardsey was about preserving a traditional, unique Welsh community and way of life. If Thomas’s idealized Wales is his microcosm for the earth in which he explores the unity of man and nature, then Bardsey reinforced this even more so.

Indeed, Bardsey was about more than preserving a nation. The island was a metaphor for a life separate from the mainland and aside from the main road; it was separate from time and surrounded on all sides by the currents of sea and wind. Symbolically, the island “meant a great deal” to Thomas because it was, as Fflur Dafydd writes, “the furthest-point-west-from-the-furthest-point-west” (“The Girl Who Went into the East” 40). But more than this, Bardsey was “the old place, with a spiritual significance in the Welsh past,” as Rogers notes (281). The treacherous trip across Bardsey Sound had been the final stage of thousands of pilgrimages since Celtic times. Later, three pilgrimages to Bardsey was said to equal one to Rome and thus the island became known as the burial place of 20,000 saints.

Beyond the island’s geography Thomas was interested in internal, spiritual “pilgrimages.” For him, the Island’s holiness lay in the state of being
and unity with the natural world which its seclusion offered. Evelyn Davies, the now-retired vicar of Aberdaron, remarks that “people learn here to just sit and be – not human doings anymore, but human beings” (Evans 160). The poet and part-time Bardsey resident Christine Evans describes her own spiritual migrations thus:

> It is the nearest I get to what the Buddhists call ‘sitting’ in meditation: getting away from the narrow, grasping self in a contemplation of ‘the other’, which is everything else. Awareness deepens. This, I believe, is where all faith springs from; it may also be an echo of what it has cost to become human and self-conscious, that sense of oneness and of inclusion experienced only intermittently in a lifetime. (127)

Such occasions in which reality breaks through one’s detached, domesticated understanding of the world reflect, for Evans, “the basic religious feeling, so old and so deep it might be called an instinct: a sense of oneness so strong it is like being in a giant presence” (161–62). In such moments, the conscious self merges with “everything else” rather than continuing to understand it as “other.”

Bardsey is defined by absence: there is no electricity, no cars, no roads, no telephones, no pylons, no pollution, and almost no people. As discussed earlier, for Thomas absence is about a deeper presence and unity – something which he sought to preserve in and through preserving Wales. On Bardsey he experienced the unity of being in the timelessness of the natural world, especially in the migration patterns and epic pilgrimages of the only thing of which the island had an abundance: birds. The ancient pre-Cambrian rocks likewise required “a reorientation of self in time,” in M. Wynn Thomas’s words
(“A Turbulent Priest” 52). This reinforced the eternal, ultimate reality which Wales embodied for Thomas.

In “That Place” (LS 8) Bardsey appears as a timeless, metaphysical place that can be experienced beyond its materiality:

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tenses
were out of place on that green
island, ringed with the rain’s
bow, that we had found and would spend
the rest of our lives looking for.
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The poem depicts Bardsey as a “resurrection” of life and the eternal, such as occurred in the thicket in Lŷn and “bright field” discussed earlier. In the latter, the sun “illuminate[s]” a field and similarly reveals the eternity – “the pearl of great price” – that lies therein, prompting the poet’s realization “that I must give all I have / to possess it” (CP 302).

Such timeless moments of unity with the Creation are the ultimate reason for the slog of serving “on a dozen committees” that “That Place” also recounts. According to Justin Wintle, this “almost certainly” (398) alludes to Thomas’s work for the Bardsey Trust. The moment when the “clouds lifted” after a rough morning and “there was a resurrection / of nature” coincides with the speaker’s renewed sense of purpose after “Life” has been “small, grey, / the smell of interiors.” He emerges into the “anointed / air” and into the power of nature after the dispiriting powerlessness of bureaucracy. An “out of place” experience reaffirms the legitimacy of the committee’s work: they are the “anointed.” Their national mandate accordingly takes on spiritual proportions as it exceeds the bounds of any one place. Protecting Wales is about protecting access to the spiritual.
Thus, in Llyn, Thomas’s concerns extend beyond his local context to the spiritual questions upon which the locality depended. As he notes in his “Autobiographical Essay,” after moving to the peninsula he began to ponder more the being and nature of God and his relation to the late twentieth-century situation, which science and technology had created in the western world. Where did the ancient world of rock and ocean fit into an environment in which nuclear physics and the computer were playing an increasingly prominent part? Or how did the traditional world of Llyn harmonize with the latest in technology? (16)

Modern civilization was alienating itself from the natural world and the spiritual foundations – or unity – that grounded it. Places like Bardsey offered reacquaintance and reorientation with these foundations. This was essential to revaluing the material world – and thus the nation – as the sacred “scaffolding of spirit,” as Thomas puts it in “Emerging” (CP 355).

As discussed earlier, this involved rethinking the nature of God. On Bardsey, as Thomas writes in “Pilgrimages” (CP 364), the “furious gargoyle / of the owl that is like a god / gone small and resentful” stared back at him from the ruins of the thirteenth-century abbey as he contemplated Divine absence and otherness. Here “hymns” and “prayer” were exchanged for “the slow chemistry of the soil / that turns saints’ bones to dust” in the timelessness of natural process. Life was about learning to be and intuiting within the self the unity of being that is God.

There is no time on this island.

The swinging pendulum of the tide has no clock; the events
are dateless. These people are not
late or soon; they are just
here with only the one question
to ask, which life answers
by being in them. It is I
who ask. Was the pilgrimage
I made to come to my own
self, to learn that in times
like these and for one like me
God will never be plain and
out there, but dark rather and
inexplicable, as though he were in here?

Yet Thomas’s nationalism was not completely inseparable from these higher matters. He resigned his chairmanship of the Bardsey Trust in the same year he accepted it after the Trust accepted a £200,000 grant from the British Nature Conservancy Council. As Rogers explains, Thomas regarded this as “English money” (281). The grant was essential for the island’s upkeep, but he “had this dream that if the Welsh were to survive it should be by their own efforts.” Perhaps it would have been hypocritical not to object but, as with the kites, what about that archetypal “green island”? “[T]he naturalist and the patriot in him were,” as Rogers writes, “pulling in different directions.”

**Nuclear Politics**

Thomas’s involvement in the politics of nuclear weapons and energy, in the 1980s, further shows the inseparability of his nationalism and
environmentalism. The 1986 Chernobyl incident, which occurred in the heat of Thomas’s anti-nuclear campaigning, had shown that “the future of Wales as a cultural entity” could not be “separated from the fate of the Earth” (Barnie, “Beauty and Bread” 60). Due to climactic conditions following the explosion, Snowdonia itself became “seriously polluted by radioactive dust,” as Barbara Pryns-Williams notes (135).

The danger of alienation from the foundations of the nation – the earth – was fully realized in the nuclear age. The ongoing exploitation of the natural world had produced such a disconnect between human and nature that humanity was at risk of destroying itself. “While feverishly exploiting, despoiling or exterminating the natural resources of the land,” Thomas read decades earlier in Guy Mountfort’s birdwatching memoir *Portrait of a Wilderness*,

we are now polluting the very air we breathe. Not even the remote atolls of the wide Pacific can escape the fall of radioactive dust created by our misadventures in the realm of atomic fission (17).

Thomas wrote against a backdrop of nuclear anxiety from the early stages of his career, after the bombing of Hiroshima. Later, in Aberdaron, the nuclear situation was “so bad that there was no way of ignoring [it]” (A 97) and it became “impossible to sit back and contemplate one’s navel” when considering “all the wonderful and innocent forms of life that would be charred to ashes” (AE 19).

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37 Cf. A 97.
For these reasons he became the regional secretary for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in Gwynedd, writing to the press, giving addresses at rallies and protests, calling for “the abolition of nuclear weapons along with the means of producing them” (“Yr Ateb I Ddifodiant”), and rejecting proposals to “bury nuclear waste in the area,” as Brown notes (R. S. Thomas 94).38 Not long before the Chernobyl disaster, Thomas took part in a protest at Carmarthen over the council’s construction of a nuclear bunker, which was seen as fuelling the threat of nuclear war. The demonstration, as Prys-Williams records, “culminated with thousands of people ‘playing dead’ . . . to simulate the results of nuclear attack” (135).39 The sacrilegious implications of nuclear war would not have been lost on the protesters as they gathered that Easter Saturday. Nuclear war meant an end to the sacramental unity of life and death. “[W]e are living under the threat of total annihilation,” Thomas writes, not only “the end of man and animal, but . . . the pollution and poisoning of the earth and the whole atmosphere” (“Yr Ateb I Ddifodiant”). As Thomas also writes in “A Nuclear Christmas,” the fallout would disrupt “disastrously the whole chain of life,” being “a nightmare from which there is no awakening.”

Meanwhile, English rhetoric that nuclear weapons protected democracy did not square with the truth and, since every Welsh county had announced itself to be “a nuclear-free area – making Wales the first nuclear-free country in Europe” (A 98) – the British government was flouting the democracy it claimed to be protecting. This was partly the case at Carmarthen. As part of a scheme financially encouraged by the British, the council was

38 Cf. Thomas, “Interview with Simon Barker” 332.
39 Cf. A 128.
buying into English hysteria while boosting the argument for stockpiling nuclear weapons as a “deterrent.” This, Thomas argues, paid lip-service to democracy in order to protect the industrial capitalism which, as Barnie observes, is “historically the twin of mass democracy” (“Beauty and Bread” 63). This “system,” historically built on colonialism and war, had created a false perception that the foundations of society lay not in the natural world but in Western capitalist democracy (“Yr Ateb I Ddifodiant”). Thus, the bomb had “changed everything but our way of thinking” (“Yr Ateb I Ddifodiant”). In A Year in Llŷn, Thomas identifies the “power and authority of the state” not with the aim of “preserving peace” but with “a clique of ambitious people who . . . represent the greed and avarice and power” (A 126) fuelling the nuclear crisis. These people have no interest in “the world of nature,” and while they purport to “protect you from the enemy” it is they “who are the enemy,” polluting “the earth and the environment for . . . profit.” Thomas therefore emphasized the apocalyptic consequences for the true foundations of society, in the hope that this would be a better deterrent of war than every nation stockpiling weapons.40

Thomas saw the nuclear threat to Wales as directly related to the Act of Union of 1536, which now put the nation “in danger of being dragged into another of England’s wars” (A 98). Wales was letting England “choose our enemies for us” (“R. S. Thomas’s Message”) when the risks were so high. The lack of Welsh autonomy was further expressed in the nuclear power stations at Wylfa and Trawsfynydd – products of British colonialism in the form of the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB), like the commercial plantations

40 See “Yr Ateb I Ddifodiant” and “A Nuclear Christmas.”
of the British Forestry Commission elsewhere in Wales. These potentially
dangerous stations were, of course, well away from London, reflecting Wales’s
subject status as an English “province” and resource. The nuclear threat was
therefore related to the enframing of the land that followed English techno-
capitalist colonialism. Royal Air Force jets practising for the next war above
the Llyn Peninsula further reinforced the nuclear issue as proof of Wales’s
subordination “under the power of the English state” (A 119). Nuclear
technology represented the final, potentially apocalyptic stage in the colonial
subjugation of nation and nature.

This view of Wales as a resource, facilitated by colonialism and the
industrialization of Wales, was obscuring the connection between people and
place, human and nature. At Wylfa and Trawsfynydd this compromised the
national space and opened it to exploitation, converting Wales (and nature)
into exploitable property rather than the foundation upon which the fate of a
people (and species) depended. As Barnie notes, the colonial machine “makes
people indifferent to the destruction of nature by authorities like the Forestry
Commission and the CEGB” (“Beauty and Bread” 61). Moreover, the nuclear
age was the product of the imperialist sense of open, endless, exploitable space
safely “over there,” away from “here.” This was “the consequence of the
developed nations thinking that the Earth’s resources can never be
exhausted,” whereupon “industrialization ravages nature . . . in the name of
progress, but really in the cause of greed and heedlessness” (Barnie 61).

Thus, it was imperative that Wales should think and behave
independently of “a government which works hand-in-hand with the world’s
capitalist institutions” (“Reject the Devil’s Work”). Thomas’s concerns about
“the growth of nuclear rivalry between the major powers and the increasing power of the multinationals” (AE 17) were closely connected.

Opposing nuclear power was opposing England, the Machine, and the disconnection of man from the unity of being. Indeed, after considering the nuclear situation, Thomas contrasts “the Wales of long ago” with the Wales of pylons and wires tainted by “the injurious effect of the Englishman’s presence” and the Industrial Revolution – “Wales’s main disaster” (A 98). He suggests that man and nature previously coexisted more harmoniously in Wales but now the “deafening roar” (A 99) of the Machine – specifically, the Royal Air Force – represented the breakdown of that relationship. The Machine was preventing a deeper awareness, “drowning” out “the song of the birds” when, in Spring, “the earth wakes up to live” (A 126). Such detachment from the “mystery” of life then played into the human desire “to tame nature” (A 99). The result was the justification “for more atomic power stations, [and] for the plutonium to be had as a result.”

All of this meant that, increasingly, Wales did not feel like Wales. As Thomas writes:

Imagine a man fifty years ago alighting from a train at a small station somewhere in the Welsh countryside at night. The first thing that would reach his ears from the darkness would be the sound of water falling from above. And on looking in the right direction he would see the dark shadow of the mountain between him and the sky, and he would be aware that he was not in England. That has gone for ever. (A 99)

Thomas suggests that Wales had instead become like England: commercialized and homogenized by the Machine. The awareness of
“ambience” – of the “circumambient, or surrounding, world,” in Morton’s words (*Ecology Without Nature* 33) – was under threat. Indeed, on this note Thomas patriotically suggests that Wales is (or used to be) the absence and negation of “England”; not just another place but the original, bare, self-disclosing ground of being in which one might, to quote one apposite poem, “concede a world” (*CLP* 24).

In light of this, Wales’s nuclear opposition was an opportunity for the nation to define itself alongside ecological principles. This offered a source of national pride as “the first nation in Europe to expel nuclear arms” (“R. S. Thomas’s Message”). It also became a way to separate Wales and the Welsh from the world of the Machine. When Thomas collected signatures for a petition to the United Nations, he noted, perhaps unfairly, that it was “the true Welsh” who signed it and the English locals who, declining, “answered in a way which is typical of them” (“R. S. Thomas’s Message”). Accordingly, Thomas looked to Wales to set a new example against “England” and its rhetoric of defence and hostility. “Can we go a step further,” he also asked, and admit that we would prefer that others use these devilish weapons against us, rather than we use them against others? That would be a loving and responsible declaration in a world which is quickly going mad. (“R. S. Thomas’s Message”)

Thus, asserting national identity and protecting the earth meant foregoing the kind of nationalism mixed up in the nuclear crisis which behaved as though the fate of all countries was not at stake.

Thomas fostered Welsh nationalism not by racial distinction but by promoting the nation’s greater ecological identity against “England.” Wales was “a small peaceful country” (*A* 97) while England was “a military nation”
(“R. S. Thomas’s Message”). England was Thomas’s representative of the industrialized, technologically-enframed state, while “Wales” was the (desired) dwelling-place of authentic being and unity. Meanwhile, the nuclear warhead was the supreme incarnation of the “English” way of thinking and, in Tony Brown’s words, the “ultimate threat of the age of the machine, the complete negation of Abercuawg” (“On the Screen of Eternity” 198).

Ultimately, in defining Welsh identity against this, Wales stood patriotically for more than a nation at a time when nationalism was driving the arms race, even though the fallout of nuclear war would undermine the very idea of separate nations. Thomas defines the national space in order to bolster Welsh consciousness and a relationship with the land which is distinct from that of the colonizer and the capitalist Machine. In contrast to the destructive progression of industrialization, Wales reflected the unity and eternity to be found in the natural world, and what could be more patriotic? Wales was not just a separate place but an idea; it embodied the path aside from the main road trodden by the major powers.

Thus Thomas forges Welsh identity through the idea of a nation’s distinctness and a way of life that ultimately transcends one nation and one place. At a time when nuclear technology re-emphasized the importance of a sense of place and, ironically, undermined the concept of the nation in its potential fallout, Wales was an idea that went beyond that concept. By aligning Wales with his eco-spiritual vision of unity, Thomas undermines the idea of the nation while making it necessary for preserving that with which he associates it. Thomas’s nationalism involves looking beyond the nation to a way of being that must be preserved in the nation for its own sake and for the
sake of the earth. In other words, he paradoxically converts Wales into an eco-spiritual concept as part of his place-based nationalism.

In “Afallon” (CLP 229), for instance, Welsh patriotism means refusing nuclear power and its connections to “international financial materialism,” in Grahame Davies’s words (n. pag.). Wales has not fully accomplished this – though it is “supposed to be a nuclear-free country . . . [t]here is nuclear activity here and there,” Thomas admits (A 156) – but it nevertheless represents the way of being that Thomas desires.

In this poem the mystical Arthurian island that is an edenic, idealized Wales is the uncorrupted world of authentic being. There Man never fell from innocence and unity and Wales never fell to the Machine. Adam never ate from the tree of knowledge and set in motion the creation of the bomb. Afallon is

Adam’s other

kingdom, what he might have

inherited had he

refused the apple, the nuclear fruit with the malignant core.

Thomas places the nuclear crisis in a mythic context of unity, identifying the bomb as the fruit of the tree of knowledge – the long-term fallout (puns intended) from Adam’s transgression. As Walford Davies explains, Thomas was critical of the scientific “gratification of knowing” that materialistically “furnishes man with ‘weapons, or tools, or ornaments, or play-withs’” (“The Site Inviolate” 18).

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41 Nb. The connection between Afallon and Eden is reinforced by the fact that its name means “appletree.”
In a manner of speaking, then, poiesis is needed to re-enter Afallon – that is, a readiness to \textit{not} know and resist the proffered “nuclear / fruit.” This entails choosing a different world which we “might have” if we choose to dwell in nature rather than seek to know and control it. Indeed, Afallon can be discovered when

we listen


to Rhiannon’s birds high

in the branches, calling to us


to forget time

for a greater unity with the eternal world of nature.

Accordingly – and significantly – Afallon is not simply “Wales” but, by association, the greater, original dwelling-place that is “not England.” In language which echoes the passage quoted earlier about experiencing the old Wales on a train platform, Thomas re-describes the “traveller” who

gets down

onto a midnight platform

and knows from the rustle

of unseen water-falls he has come home.

This evokes the self-disclosing of place – the autopoiesis – that one needs to discern in order to be \textit{in} “Wales.” “Home” is, importantly, undefined, and so perhaps Welsh nationalism depends upon “returning,” in Grahame Davies’s words, to the “spiritual roots” of Wales’s “existence as a nation.” “In a world / oscillating between dollar / and yen,” Thomas writes, “our liquidities are immaterial.” His pun signals the importance of that which goes beyond the material limits and wealth of the nation. Accordingly, one can ecologically
“define the role” of Thomas’s nationalism, as Davies reinforces, as “a weapon in the battle with the machine.”

Naturally, Thomas turns to birds for this greater sense of identity and poiesis. Birdwatching went hand-in-hand with his nuclear politics. As he went about “collecting members for his newly formed branch of CND,” his wife Elsi recalls that he also “rush[ed] all over the peninsula after birds” (Rogers 281). Conceivably, the two dovetailed in his mind, an unlikely but powerful pairing. Thomas’s lobbying was an opportunity for more birdwatching, and birdwatching presented an antidote to the nuclear discord. The birds’ “traditional business” stood in stark contrast to the way that mankind was “exhausting the earth of its resources and polluting it” (A 99). The timeless continuity of the natural world provided a greater sense of place and unity against the chaotic world of the Machine. “Thinking of [the birds’] migrations, looking at the stars at night,” Thomas writes, he “would marvel at how miraculous the creation was” (A 100). Migrating birds also transcended the boundaries of nations, laying bare an important reality. Although the Chernobyl crisis was yet to prove the truth of the world’s interconnectedness, Thomas understood how nuclear radiation, as Timothy Morton notes, is “ignorant of national boundaries” (“Environmentalism” 697). As the Welsh poet Gillian Clarke writes of that catastrophe, “each little town / in Europe [became] twinned to Chernobyl” and that spring “a lamb sip[ped] caesium on a Welsh hill” (“Neighbours,” Collected Poems 85).

Nevertheless, birds convey the continuity of natural process and the hope which lies in remembering these foundations. At the end of “Neighbours,” Clarke watches “for [the] spring migrations” as signs of healing and the abiding ecological unity of the natural world. As the speaker watches
for “one bird returning with green in its voice,” birds also speak of the foundations that a disaster, ironically, forces us to remember. One must heed that green voice, Clarke suggests, apprised of the frightening interconnectedness of the earth by the late spring and the birds falling over Europe, regardless of nation.

Similarly, in imagery which contextualizes the nuclear age in the mythic terms of human hubris and alienation from these foundations, Thomas appeals to the regenerative power of nature. “Despairing of God’s continuing concern for the sceptical world of the late twentieth century which has engaged in thoughtless devastation of his creation,” as Barbara Prys-Williams explains, “Thomas fuses the dove of Genesis, which returned with a token of hope to Noah’s ark, with the spirit of God descending as a dove to inspire Jesus” (136).

Dove of God,

self-powered, return
to this wrecked ark, though it be
with radiation in your bill. (CLP 67)

Similarly, in the poem beginning “At the grave’s head” (CLP 32) a dove image conveys the promise of unity with the eternal. Moss on a gravestone is like the wings

of a dove daily
returning from its journey
over the dark waters
with green in its bill.
Birds are heralds of the eternal processes of nature. Birdsong, as Thomas says, “responds to the call of the spring” (A 126); it is an innate response to the call of life – the unity of being – that is concealed and drowned out by the Machine.

Heidegger’s short essay “The Pathway” may help focus Thomas’s thoughts. This call of being, or Zuspruch – which Thomas O’Meara explains as “a summons . . . into [man’s] . . . essential self-absence” and which might be understood as unity – “preserves the enigma of what abides and is great” (72). Here Heidegger refers to everything that has its being within his localized context and together brings forth the world or dwelling place. “The danger looms,” Heidegger continues, “that men today” cannot hear this call but only “the noise of the media” and modernity. But those who respond to the call of “[t]he wide expanse of everything that grows and abides along the pathway . . . [and] bestows world” will “outlast the gigantic energies of atomic power, which human calculation has . . . made into fetters,” and find the “gateway to the eternal.” In a manner of speaking, then, Thomas suggests that we have two choices: the bomb or birds.

The Welsh Farmer

This choice underlies Thomas’s response to his (in)famous “prototype” (CP 4) of man connected to the earth. Whether or not the Welsh farmer pays attention to birds determines his worth, in the poet’s eyes, as a representative of Wales and the greater, spiritual unity with the earth that “Wales” represents. The farmer’s life enacts the tensions between this unity and the world of the Machine – between “Wales” and “England” – further reflecting
how issues that affect nature and nation are intertwined. Thomas looks to the Welsh farmer to define the “true Wales” and “true Welsh” and resolve eco-national issues.

In the farmer poems birdwatching is especially politicized. As Fflur Dafydd notes, “birds are posited time and time again as an adversary to many of the modern developments within Wales – against industry and colonization, both of whom are linked inexorably to the plague of Anglicization keenly felt by the poet” (“There Were Fathoms” 123). When birds “bring” the farmer “small songs” in the poem “Enigma” (SYT 68), for instance, their “wide bills” (emphasis added) implicitly oppose the materialist, capitalist, and ultimately English currency which alters the Welshman’s relationship to the land, enslaving him to the colonial Machine.

These are Thomas’s “bardic birds,” so named because, as natural-world counterparts to the bards who sang of and for Wales (including Thomas), they act as national prophets and natural-world poets, upholding Welsh cultural identity and independence and evoking the connectedness of Welsh culture to its natural environment. These birds represent a landscape which discloses itself in opposition to the Machine which obscures the Welsh/human connection to the land. Thus, when the farmer listens to the birds, answering the call sounded in Thomas’s birdwatching essays, he practises the poiesis of birdwatching and uncovers the “true Wales” and deeper unity.

“Enigma,” though, presents a farmer whose materialism deadens his awareness of the earth, an awareness which offers wholesome sustenance and enrichment. If he would only accept the birds’ alternative “crop” and payment then he would challenge the prevailing mentality that enslaves him. In line with Thomas’s emphasis on developing a sense of place through knowing the
local flora and fauna, “Enigma” suggests that if the farmer learned the names of birds and flowers he would awaken to a greater sense of his being in the earth. As it is, the “nameless flowers / That minister” to the farmer “through the tedious hours / Of sweat and toil” lift their faces to him “in vain.” Accordingly, no sacramental understanding and redemption from the hardship of his material existence is (ad)ministered to him. The “squealing curlew and the loud thrush” are “both identical, just birds,” and so the farmer’s focus remains fixed on the “gaunt womb” of the earth rather than on the immaterial “rich crop / Of music swelling thickly to the hedge top.” He only sees his environment in the reductive, enframing terms of the Machine, resenting the birds which consume the “live seed” but reimburse him with song, as his “enemies.” Similarly, of the flowers he “notices only the weeds’ way / Of wrestling with and choking the young hay.” The farmer fails to respond to the land beyond its status as a resource. He therefore fails to dwell in and model a deeper connection with the land as the source of his being and of joy, beauty, and grace.

Thus, the speaker laments that the farmer is

Blind? Yes, and deaf, and dumb, and the last irks most,
For could he speak, would not the glib tongue boast
A lore denied our neoteric sense,
Being handed down from the age of innocence?
Or would the cracked lips, parted at last, disclose
The embryonic thought that never grows?

Such a figure can hardly inspire patriotism and often, in the poems, becomes a parable of the alienating effects of the Machine. The farmer’s relationship to the earth is tediously transactional rather than a relationship of intimate
reciprocity. Despite the earth’s beauty he sees only the “gaunt womb” from which he must scrape a living – a standpoint which makes his life oppressive and even enframes him, reducing and restricting his existence to the provision of a service and his own, merely material needs.

Yet admittedly, it would be unfair and unrealistic to expect the Welsh farmer – who has bills to pay – to subsist on birdsong and flowers alone. It is important to note, then, that this ideology goes back to Thomas’s emphasis on the spiritual identity of Wales and access to “ultimate reality” through the imagination. Therefore, this is a response to the alienating, dehumanizing effects of the Machine, rather than a definitive political expectation or ideology. It is also important to note that the poem is part of an open, ongoing dialogue about the relationship between human and nature and what it means to be connected to the earth. While Thomas idealizes some farmers for resisting technology, poems such as “Enigma” form part of an ongoing contemplation about the impact of the Machine on human life.

Nevertheless, Thomas’s ideal Welshman is often conveyed in terms of birdwatching and the spiritual awareness that accompanies it. In his essay “The Depopulation of Welsh Hill Country,” he evokes the plight of those last few and what their disappearance means for Wales. They may not be “poetically-minded,” or their hard, desperate lives romantic, but they are the remnants of a way of life that is more in tune with the natural world, a “manifestation” of the “strange spirit of life” and of Wales (Prose 20). As Thomas writes,

they understand the land and the climate. How often has it been said that the health and wealth of a country depends upon its possession of a sturdy, flourishing peasantry? . . . are not three-
quarters of our modern ills due to the fact that we have forgotten how to live . . . ? Yet in these uplands we have a people who still enjoy life. Neighbour to the wind and cloud and the wild birds of the moor, they can still find time to ‘stand and stare’. (Prose 22)

Accordingly, the farmers are models to live by but also people in whose lives the tensions between Man and the Machine, between the modern world and authentic human being, and the effects on Wales and the earth, are played out in Thomas’s poems.

In “Enigma,” for instance, the farmer enigmatically poses questions about his status as a cultural hero in tune with the land, as well as questions about what it means to be human and connected to the earth. Is his connection to the earth so absolute that his mind is not “exquisitely” fitted to it but mindless, “embryonic,” his unenlightened, unhuman gaze yoked to the soil and ignorant of the birds’ “music swelling thickly to the hedge top”? Has man’s evolutionary development come at the cost of his connection to nature? Does being from the “age of innocence” mean being more “of nature” than human? Is there something to learn about the human relationship with the rest of nature, but the farmer is too “Blind . . . deaf, and dumb” to express it? If so, how can the farmer model the human/cultural connection to nature and, by extension, of Welshman and Wales? Thus, while Thomas explores the connections between the local culture and its natural environment, he contemplates deeper questions about the relationship, and point of separation, between Nature and Culture, Nature and Human. In other words, the romantic idea of a certain people intimately connected to a certain place is not pursued at the expense of exploring the non-anthropocentric reality of the
relationship between human and nature. Ultimately, the farmer remains an enigma as Thomas continually struggles to find his eco-national hero.

In “Cynddylan on a Tractor” (CP 30), which was previously mentioned in Chapter One, the speaker directs his audience to a Welsh farmer who has been corrupted by the Machine. Named after a legendary Welsh king – which ironically highlights the degeneration of farmer and nation – Cynddylan has lost his connection to the earth and with it his humanity. His proud rebirth as “a great man” empowered by technology is therefore deeply ironic. In freeing himself from the “soil” to become its master he yokes himself to the Machine. As the “blood” in his veins has been replaced by “oil” the ability to feel and respond to the earth has been exchanged for new priorities: an existence based on consumption, efficiency, and power, but which is also symbolically dependent upon – even in servitude to – the fossil fuel industry.

As in “Enigma,” Cynddylan’s transgressions are measured by his ignorance of the bardic birds which try to overpower the Machine’s influence and restore his connection to the world around him.

Riding to work now as a great man should,
He is the knight at arms breaking the fields’
Mirror of silence, emptying the wood
Of foxes and squirrels and bright jays.
The sun comes over the tall trees
Kindling all the hedges, but not for him
Who runs his engine on a different fuel.
And all the birds are singing, bills wide in vain,
As Cynddylan passes proudly up the lane.
The tractor’s invasion of the farm represents the colonial Machine’s invasion of Wales and the ways in which ecological and national issues are connected. The tractor drowns out the natural world’s agency and presence, separating Cynddylan from his environment and that which truly fuels him: the sunrise, the fields’ tranquillity, the soil, the birdsong. Cynddylan’s insensitivity and disconnection from the natural world then leads to the “breaking [of] the fields’ / Mirror of silence” and “emptying [of] the wood,” making him a perversion of Thomas’s ideal custodian of Welsh heritage. In this way the poem explores how the Machine works by obscuring the connection between human and nature, and between a local culture and its traditional relationship with the land. This in turn enables the imperialist goal of cultural homogenization and capitalist expansion. The loss of the old Welsh farmer is the first step in this process.

In an interview, Thomas admits turning “to birds” as “I lost my dreams of having a kind of Wales that was pure, that was preserved from . . . tractors rushing down the lanes” (“R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge” 48). Seemingly in accordance with this, “Cynddylan” implies that birdwatching is a way of discovering the true Wales. The poem suggests that if Cynddylan could listen to the birds he would rediscover his being-in-the-world and hence the nation. In opposition to the Machine, the birds offer the farmer a different awareness and sense of connection to the earth; they are positioned, as Dafydd also observes, “against Anglicization and the machine” and as “the alternative to colonization and mechanization” (“There Were Fathoms” 122–23).

In the poem, birds represent the self-disclosing of the natural world against the way that the Machine silences and enframes it. As discussed, this self-disclosing or physis – the “arising of something from out of itself” in
nature – is the “highest” form of poiesis (Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” 317). Thus, birdwatching is presented as a poietic practice which, in its openness to the self-revealing of the earth, would free the Welsh countryside into its self-presencing. For Cynddylan to hear the birds would be for him to register and experience the ambient sounds and songs of the fields which tranquilly coalesce around him – not silence. He would hear the way that the natural world desperately calls to him as he blindly goes about its, and his, destruction – a parable, surely, for our time.

Thus the poem suggests that nationalism first involves maintaining authentic relationships with one’s natural environment. If Cynddylan could abandon the tractor to hear the birds and the sound of his own blood pumping he might awake to the beauty around him and regain his humanity. Implicitly, the natural world – the sunrise and birdsong – would kindle his imagination and light his spirit, connecting him to what is, for Thomas, the eternal creative process of the earth. Listening to birds would be a way for Cynddylan to become part of that ambient environment, a version of old man. While that existence has connotations of enslavement, Thomas suggests that it would not compromise the farmer’s integrity and that this is where true freedom and authentic human being lie. The freedom the Machine offers Cynddylan is an illusion, a negation of his humanity. Moreover, this way of living recognizes the earth’s primacy not man’s superiority; not how one is “above” the earth but “yoked” to it, dependent upon it – an uncomfortable truth which society needs to acknowledge more than ever. In any case, as Ned Thomas asserts, rather than simply condemning technology “[i]t is a search for meaning and purpose, a concern with Being that runs through the poems” (57). While “[i]n earlier times,” as Ned Thomas notes, “the endless cycle of heavy work on the

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land ensured that we remained unconscious,” now the Machine “offers a false consciousness, a sense that we know where we are going, when we are only confusing motion with purpose.” The poem therefore focuses not on the evil of technology but on its effect on us and our relationship with the earth.

Indeed, the poem sheds light on this relationship and what it means to be human – two things which the Machine obscures as part of its ecological and colonial takeover. Cynddylan loses his humanity as he embraces the Machine, and his actions betray his ignorance of what sustains him and makes him human. Far from being superior to the rest of nature, as he is led to believe, being human therefore means being close to the earth, even submissively “yoked” to it. Indeed, perhaps this relationship is held intact by traditional agricultural practices and technology, like the yoke, which limits the degree of human control over nature.

Cynddylan’s supposed technological freedom is not his evolution to the highest form of human being but his dehumanization and enslavement to an unimaginative, soulless existence governed by productivity and efficiency. Although the “gears obey / His least bidding,” giving him the illusion of control, he is merely a cog in the Machine. Moreover, by seeing himself as separate from nature, and seeing nature as “standing reserve,” he is part of the Machine’s ordering of the world. In this reductive and consumerist system he himself can only be limited and reduced to a resource for the Machine’s ends. Thus the tractor’s colonization of the farm allegorizes the colonization of human and Wales by the Machine. The poem therefore dramatizes how, as Bate observes of the links between colonialism and environmental issues, “ecological exploitation is always coordinate with social exploitation” (48).
The farmer’s failure to role model the relationship between human and nature is further evaluated in “Valediction” (CP 38). Here the speaker bitterly parts ways with a farmer whose materialistic life falls short of “man’s potential stature.” Unlike Cynddylan, his transgression is not prideful ignorance of the bards of nature but the refusal to listen to them. The speaker’s anger arises because of this inexcusable affront. This is no grumbling belligerence toward the natural world, as in “Enigma,” but the unnatural severance of the farmer’s physical and spiritual connection to the earth. Consequently, he cannot be redeemed as part of the sacramental material-spiritual unity discussed in Chapter Three nor, therefore, as a representative of Wales. As part of the Machine, and focused only upon making a living, the farmer herds “pennies” – not sheep but the money they represent to him – in his dreams, rather than being the shepherd to his people whom Thomas seeks.

Initially, the speaker explains that his Romantic expectations of the farmer proved naïve. Rather than an enlightened, imaginative being “clothed” in the hills’ “grace” and borne of their beauty and freshness, the farmer’s “slow wake” through the fields is not one of rebirth or awakening but spiritual death:

You failed me, farmer, I was afraid you would
The day I saw you loitering with the cows,
Yourself one of them but for the smile,
Vague as moonlight, cast upon your face
From some dim source, whose nature I mistook.
The hills had grace, the light clothed them
With wild beauty, so that I thought,
Watching the pattern of your slow wake
Through seas of dew, that you yourself
Wore that same beauty by the right of birth.

Having once seen rural Wales as having a Wordsworthian “dew on things” (A 55), as he admits, Thomas criticizes the farmer rather than his own expectations about lives lived close to the earth. Focusing on the beauty of Wales (not the hardships there) and the farmer as “a symbol of the relationship that existed between man and the earth in the contemporary world of the machine” (A 55), Thomas rails against the one person best placed to affirm the “kinship” between man and earth and, apparently, the Welsh “right of birth.” Rather than reflecting reciprocity with his environment – which would redeem his “spite or guile” in accordance with the earth’s “seasonal round / Of sun and rain” in which “All is requited” and “forgiven” – the farmer’s “uncouthness” has “No kinship with the earth.” His failure to prove that in “[l]ow and rustic life, . . . the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature” (Wordsworth, MW 597), or demonstrate how “exquisitely” mind and nature are “fitted” (198), constitutes a failure to all men and Welshmen. The farmer shows no descent from this land, no natural or cultural inheritance. To this extent he fails to represent the Welsh claim to Wales as well as human kinship with the earth at a time when these relationships are increasingly threatened by the Machine.

However, while the speaker is forced to accept that the Wordsworthian theory is not always true, his disenchantment is with the farmer – and, perhaps, men like him – rather than with nature, which the speaker still believes has the “grace” and power to raise man to his highest “potential.” The poem’s emphasis, then, is the failure of one (Welsh)man to live up to “man’s potential stature” not, as S. J. Perry suggests, the ultimate failure of the Wordsworthian theory (Chameleon Poet 101). Indeed, the speaker uses this
failure to affirm devoutly that theory, and determine man’s “kinship” with nature against the farmer, who is dismissed as an “Unnatural and inhuman” exception or aberration.

The key to man’s potential as an imaginative, spiritual being connected to the earth once again lies in birdwatching and openness to the self-disclosing of the earth. This is shown through the farmer’s “Unnatural and inhuman” failure:

The two things
That could redeem your ignorance, the beauty
And grace that trees and flowers labour to teach
Were never yours, you shut your heart against them.
You stopped your ears to the soft influence
Of birds, preferring the dull tone
Of the thick blood, the loud, unlovely rattle
Of mucus in the throat, the shallow stream
Of neighbours’ trivial talk.

For this I leave you
Alone in your harsh acres, herding pennies
Into a sock to serve you for a pillow
Through the long night that waits upon your span.

The speaker embraces the Romantic idea of the book of nature and its edifying appeal. The “soft influence / Of birds” has the ability to shape different views and values through the appeal of joy and beauty, like Wordsworth’s linnet and thrush in “The Tables Turned.” The speaker believes that nature can be the farmer’s “teacher” if he brings “a heart / That watches and receives” (Wordsworth, MW 130–31). This poietic openness to the other-than-human
world around him would redeem his “wild ways” and “ignorance.” The natural world “labour[s] to teach” and disclose its fullness to him, the “beauty / And grace” available “by [his] right of birth.” This is the deeper sacramental unity of life and death embodied in nature’s “seasonal” moods. The poem suggests that such an imaginative response to nature is a natural human response and, as discussed in Chapter Three, evidence of human connectedness to the earth’s underlying creative unity. Moreover, the ability to read the “flower printed book of nature” (“Enigma”) would affirm the human place within an essentially autopoietic, self-disclosing world. This reveals how the sensory/material and imaginative/spiritual are intertwined within human being.

The farmer, though, is “Unnatural and inhuman” because he cuts himself off from these parts of himself. Wilfully blind and deaf to anything beyond his basic material and materialistic world, he shuts his heart against the deeper, eco-spiritual unity in a biblically-arrogant way. He only listens to the “dull” throbbing of his self-centred corporeal existence, blocking out the vibrant world around him just as the tractor did to Cynddylan. By severing himself from the world around him he divides himself from his natural being. Like Morgan in “The Minister” he never hears the external “Music calling to the hushed / Music within” (CP 54). The result of his spiritual and imaginative neglect, then, is a diseased, nonreciprocal relationship with his environment. The “rattle” of phlegm in his throat is a reminder of how the tractor’s “clutch curses” in “Cynddylan” and juxtaposed with the “soft influence / Of birds.”

“Valediction” therefore suggests that man’s connectedness to nature is defined by his stature as an imaginative, spiritual being, and that through this he may join in “kinship with the earth” and the deeper sacramental unity. The
farmer is denounced because he fails to display these qualities. In some poems, the farmer is too much “of the earth” to be a representative of the human spiritual connection to nature; in others he is not sufficiently “of the earth” but too closely associated with the trappings of human culture. In both cases, Thomas struggles to find his prototype for the link between nature and culture, the material world and the spiritual. In “Valediction,” though, the farmer fails on all counts: he has no spiritual or physical relationship with the earth and for this the speaker abandons him altogether.

The reasons for Thomas’s disappointment are made clearer in “Those Others” (CP 111) where the speaker goes so far as to express his hatred for my own kind,

for men of the Welsh race
who brood with dark face
over their thin navel
to learn what to sell

In this poem the speaker takes solace in the natural world and the farmer. These “other / Castaways” who are excluded from this indictment offer a tragic beauty and redemption for Wales. The speaker feels that he has been called to honour the farmers’ sacrifice for the nation, their alternative, upstanding life wherein lies Wales’s salvation. The farmers call to me,

Clinging to their doomed farms;
Their hearts though rough are warm
And firm, and their slow wake
Through time bleeds for our sake.
They are ghostly reminders of the authentic Wales of the past and of a
different relationship with the land,

the brute earth

That is strong here and clean
And plain in its meaning
As none of the books are
That tell but of the war

Of heart with head, leaving
The wild birds to sing
The best songs

Once again, in the face of the materialistic and dualistic world, nature holds
the key to authentic being. The land is harsh and uncivilized but also raw,
unrefined, and humbling in its wild, undomesticated nature. This Wales is
self-disclosing, offering a world that has not been concealed or mediated by
the Machine’s false consciousness. The earth is “strong . . . and clean / And
plain in its meaning.” “[W]ild birds” sing “[t]he best songs” because their
“unpremeditated art” (the quote is from Keats’s nightingale ode), is a
spontaneous “religious” response with their whole being to the unfolding of
the world. Moreover, unlike the “books” which distinguish between heart and
head, instinct and rationality, they uncomplicatedly sing of the world and
unity with it. Thus the poem juxtaposes the book of nature with human ways
of looking at or “reading” the earth, encouraging a poietic openness to the
earth’s “clean / And plain . . . meaning” rather than the kind of
anthropocentric obfuscation that leads to seeing the land in terms of its
marketability. The book of nature is positioned against the “books” and ideas
which obscure the simple, primal level of human involvement with nature. The birds’ singing may call to something instinctive within the human which resolves the internal division of heart and head – an immediate, intuited connection with the earth that is not filtered through the mind. They seem, as Thomas says of poetry, to “arrive[] at the intellect / by way of the heart” (CLP 355). In a post-Enlightenment world obsessed with the rational and cerebral, perhaps the birds elicit a sensory response that reminds one of the unity of mind and body, and thus of human connectedness to the natural world. There is that sense, as Thomas puts it in “Perhaps” (CP 353), that the modern rational world must “learn to distrust the distrust / of feeling.” Indeed, as discussed in Chapter Three, the sensory is an important part of understanding the deeper unity of being.

Accordingly, the farmers are singled out from the other “men of the Welsh race” because of their affinity with the land and poiesis. Their stalwart and heroic commitment to an endangered way of life lived close to the land stands in contrast to the moral weakness of those who have become distanced from it. In Tony Brown’s words, these farmers are “emblem[s]” of a “stubborn resistance to the intrusive world of consumerism and market values” (R. S. Thomas 2). They represent “an older, truer way of life rooted in the rhythms of Welsh rural life,” uncompromised by the industrial-capitalist world. They are models of dwelling, being “rooted in a place, and know[ing] the truth of who they are” (3). The philosophical separation of heart and head, body and mind, matter and spirit, nature and human, has not affected their relationship with the natural world. Disconnection from the natural foundations of the nation enabled the selling of its “natural beauty, its history and its culture to tourists
from England” (Brown, *R. S. Thomas* 2). But for the farmer, as Thomas writes in “Green Categories,”

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all is sure;

Things exist rooted in the flesh,

Stone, tree and flower. (CP 77)
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The eco-national importance of the poiesis of birdwatching is further revealed in “Affinity” (*CP* 8), where the farmer stands “bare-headed in the woods’ wide porch / Morning and evening to hear God’s choir / Scatter their praises.” Here, unlike in “Valediction” or “Enigma,” birds are not “just birds” but part of the earth’s disclosing of the Divine. Indeed the farmer has “the world for church” as though he sees the earth in the “religious” terms discussed in Chapter Three. The material and spiritual are intertwined for him and, accordingly, he is a spiritual as well as a material being. The earth “enrich[es] his spirit” and satisfies his “essential need” – that is, his basic material and innermost spiritual needs. This Wordsworthian kinship with the earth means that, despite his unfamiliar and brutal life “[g]aitered with mud” and “[s]tumbling insensitively from furrow to furrow,” he “also is human,” his name “also . . . written in the Book of Life.”

In particular, the farmer’s birdwatching confirms that his “inertness,” in Calvin Bedient’s words, is “another name for the peace of God” (64). The “vague somnambulist” (“Affinity”) of the fields is not an insensitive, unromantic failure but an almost surreal, dreamlike figure “lost in his own breath” and descended from a time when human and nature, material and spiritual, existed in uninterrupted unity. The supposed mindlessness of the Thomasian farmer is here a deeper state of being and unity which affirms, rather than negates, his humanness. While the “brainbox” has driven the war
of heart with head for the farmer’s implied spectators in the poem – whom the
speaker bids “Consider this man in the field beneath” – the farmer listens to
the wild birds, feeling his unity with the earth and God within him. His
freedom from his spectators’ materialistic, intellectualized, and
anthropocentric values – those of “education or caste or creed” which locate
human being away from the “mud” and “sweat” of the farmer’s “aimless” life –
makes him fully at one with the ground of his being, at peace with “the brute
necessities of the Creation” (Bedient 65). Thus, his name “also is written in the
Book of Life” (“Affinity”). His onlookers are accordingly challenged to
reconsider their values and needs as they go about their lives, moving on and
away from their prototype in the field who is tellingly “beneath” them. Indeed,
the bareness of the farmer’s life is its fullness, as suggested by the difficult
question: “[i]s there anything to show that your essential need / Is less than
his, who has the world for church . . .?” His sense of “the world” as God’s home
– in contrast to his spectators’ implicit difficulty with understanding this –
makes the absence of those other “needs” or distractions a deeper fullness and
presence.

Thus, like a prophet telling a parable the speaker directs his audience –
the farmer’s observers – to “[c]onsider” the being “in the field beneath” and
“the way he lives.” Disconnected from the real, “essential” world, the farmer’s
perplexed onlookers are encouraged to realize their affinity with “his kind”
and his world. Rather than being “[u]nnatural and inhuman” for not fulfilling
expectations, the farmer is “also . . . human” because of his natural and
spiritual affinity with the earth. His stark naturalness and strangeness is
therefore not unhuman but something which reveals our roots in the earth
(we are, after all, among his spectators). The farmer demonstrates the unity of
the material and spiritual within human being. His name is also “written in the Book of Life” by virtue of his imaginative capacity and spiritual sensibility, his “total response of the whole person to reality” (*PBRV* 8–9) – Thomas’s definition of religion. This further redeems his human existence, revealing his onlookers’ kinship with him; his mind is “inflamed” by “the same small star” that “lights” them “homeward.” The farmer conveys a challenge to their conventional assumptions about what it means to be human. Humankind is not separate from the farmer and his starkly natural life – as the cultured onlookers implicitly assume, struggling to find kinship with the primitive figure stumbling through the fields – because “He also is human.”

The poem therefore creates a sense of connection to nature and nation through a sense of kinship with the farmer and, subsequently, with the earth. This establishes the Welsh farmer as a cultural hero. He models authentic being and dwelling for a society which has become distanced from the earth. In turn, he models a close, reciprocal relationship with the land, making a nationalist statement of his belonging and of an authentic “Welsh” spiritual relationship with the land. Once again, at the heart of Thomas’s writing about Wales is his fundamental concern about the relationship between humankind and the earth.
Conclusion

It is fitting that towards the end of writing this thesis a forgotten bird poem emerged, one that eluded Tony Brown and Jason Walford Davies’s 2013 collection of the many others that Thomas had published in diverse periodicals and limited editions. “Watching,” discovered in an obscure 1962 anthology, flew into my inbox as if to emphasize that no study of R. S. Thomas’s birds can be complete.\(^{42}\) It was also a welcome reminder of the constant importance of birds in his poetic vision, and of the poiesis of birdwatching.

Significantly, “Watching” includes the first known mention of Thomas’s “rare bird,” his conceit for the hidden and fugitive God – the being that is not a being – to which the poiesis of birdwatching ultimately leads.

One life was not long enough.

Although the light fused many times

In the course of his stay, the rare bird

Never came, coasting the marsh,

Where the rush burned. He lived knowing

That eyes not his had seen it depart

In a far summer. His thought compelled it

In cold skies, where it hung back

And waited for the snow to deploy

Its white army. There was room on the bog,

Where the man pondered; the still pools’

Cameras were focused, but day after day
They took nothing but the blank sky’s
Incident, or at night the stars,
The spent flakes of remoter storms. (Whiting 8)

As in “Sea-watching” (CP 306), the “rare bird” conceals itself; it hangs back, there but not there. However, although there is no moment of vision or revelation, birdwatching – in the poem, as the poem, beyond the poem – brings forth God as that which cannot or refuses to be brought forth. This preserves God’s otherness to man’s subjective definition and so His undelimited, eternal possibility. Hence, “[o]ne life” is truly “not long enough” to see the rarefied bird. Since Thomas’s line-breaks frequently complicate meaning, the poem hints that a mortal life cannot capture the eternal long-exposure photograph, as it were, of what appears to be a blank sky but is also “the blank sky’s / Incident.” This Arnoldian image and the paradoxical incidence of nothing is a characteristically Thomasian affirmation of the single uninterrupted event, having no beginning or end, that is being-itself – or what he also calls ultimate reality. This is the “nothing” that is everything, Heidegger’s Open, the undelimited, the ground and unity of being, the “eternal / I AM” that humankind struggles to “see” from within its “mortal cage” (“A Thicket in Lleyn,” CP 511).

Thus, despite the poem’s undeniable sense of spiritual torpor and longing, it still has that curious mix of Thomasian negativity which, especially in “Sea-watching,” is begrudgingly optimistic. Why else would the “birdwatcher” continue searching? The poet has faith that there is more than the “cold skies” might admit. This in itself is evidence of things not seen, of the call of some primordial reality or long “depart[ed]” state of being from “a far
summer.” Although the “rare bird” hangs back behind the “cold skies” of this world – imagery which evokes a world in which Keats’s rainbow has been unwoven, in which “no god any longer gathers men and things unto himself” and appears “for the world” as “the ground that grounds it,” in Heidegger’s words (“What are poets for?” 91–92) – the nature of that rare bird is still brought forth. As in the later poem “There are nights that are so still” (ERS 78–79) there is a sense of “that other being who is awake . . . / . . . for eternity,” its remoteness heard in the cry of the “small owl calling / far off.”

“Watching” not only presents the poiesis of birdwatching in practice – that revealing or “occasion,” as Heidegger says, which lets “what is not yet present arrive into [self-]presencing” (“The Question Concerning Technology” 317) – but presents poiesis as a practice. After all, poiesis “extends ultimately to a whole way of life,” it is “a form of praxis: that of knowing how to dwell” (Rigby, “Earth, World, Text” 430). Birdwatching is Thomas’s metaphor for this state of vigilance and openness to the self-disclosing of the ground of being, of ultimate reality, of the eternal and Divine. The poet, speaking of himself in the third-person as though he perceives the overarching purpose in his birdwatching, sees the latter as a way of life, something he will pursue “over the course” of his short “stay.” This practice is a response to those “cold skies,” a refusal to be beaten down by – or determination to take heart from – the knowledge that “eyes not his had seen [the bird] depart / In a far summer.” The birddwatcher does not wish to transcend this life of absence and emptiness – indeed, this life is “not long enough” to satisfy him. Instead, he is devoted to his task of contemplating the unity of being within the timeless creative and destructive processes of the universe evoked in the stars’ “spent flakes.” The ongoing search for the “rare bird” means clinging to a sense of
deeper and greater meaning in a poem that is ostensibly trying to cope with the loss of it in the vast emptiness of space and its “remoter storms.” Against this absence the birdwatcher stands, binoculars raised, open to a deeper state of being in which the “rare bird” may reveal itself.

As this thesis has shown, from within the confines of human language and subjectivity, and in contrast to the revelations of modern technology, the poiesis of birdwatching reveals but does not conceal what is self-presencing and primordial, what precedes human “enframing” and compartmentalization. Poiesis preserves the unity of being or “ambience” (Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* 33) of the world. As Heidegger’s lecture on technology suggests, poiesis has ecological value because it forms a response to applied, dualistic science and the objectified, materialistic world revealed by technology. This is what Ned Thomas, following Heidegger, calls the “imprisoning mode of thought” (54) and “false consciousness” (57) cultivated by technology. By making the world appear as silent, soulless, desacralized matter, the Machine, as R. S. Thomas calls it, not only enframes the world as a resource for exploitation but “blocks” the way to “a more original revealing” and “more primal truth” about that world and our place as humans within it (Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” 333). Ultimately, when the world appears to Man only as his “construct” he fails to “encounter” his true “essence” (332) – the ways in which he too is part of the unfolding creative unity of being.

In Thomas’s writing the poiesis of birdwatching involves revealing and responding to the self-disclosing of the material and spiritual unity of being – of God – that humankind might better “dwell” upon the earth. This means attuning “oneself in that which one thinks, does, and makes to that which is
given with . . . a particular natural environment” (Rigby 430). As Heidegger explains, to dwell is to “preserve and care” for what is self-presencing in “its essential being” (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 147, 149).

For Thomas, this means seeing the world not through the eyes of the Machine but in an imaginative and spiritual way focused upon openness, absence, and unknowing. Birdwatching was not just a metaphor for this. His trip to Spain was, after all, about “broaden[ing]” his mind (“A Rare Bird”: R. S. Thomas) through encountering a wild and undomesticated world. On another level, birdwatching provided encounters with Coleridge’s “Primary Imagination,” the eternal, underlying creative processes of the universe. This revealed that there was “only the mind to fly with” (CP 511) and that the imagination was the key to realizing the creative unity of existence and hence our connection to ultimate reality. Accordingly, what greater validation of poetry could there be in the age of the Machine and its “cold skies,” or in the wake of post-structuralism? The poetic imagination is not a point of difference between humanity and the rest of nature or something which stands in the way of unconscious unity with the earth. Rather, it is a natural and naturally human means of coming “nearer to the actual being of God as displayed in action” (PBRV 8).

In essence, poiesis is “religious”: it brings forth the ineffable and undelimited unity of being as a manifestation of that creative unity; it preserves the sacred; it is a way of encountering and envisioning “God.” This emphasis on revealing the underlying spiritual unity of the earth and our human connection to it is at the heart of Thomas’s national, religious, and ecological discourse. Chapter One shows how birdwatching is a way for Thomas to appreciate the wild, self-disclosing of the natural world. Through
this he envisions his being-in-the-world when, as S. J. Perry notes, the scientific world of the Machine is “not conducive to the life of the spirit and the imagination” (Chameleon Poet 137). Chapter Six comes full circle to show that this sense of unity is also important for the unity of Welshman and Wales. Thus Thomas’s environmentalism is fuelled by the national and wider cultural problems of humanity’s increasing alienation from the wild. His desire for Welsh sovereignty also corresponds with his desire for the land to be able to speak for and disclose itself in the face of the colonial Machine. This informs Thomas’s national “call to birdwatching” and environmental activism.

Meanwhile, Chapter Two describes the processes and principles of poiesis and how it reveals the deeper ground and unity of being – a focus which also reveals the ecological scope of Thomas’s nationalism. Chapter Three unpacks Thomas’s brand of “nature spirituality” and its ecological implications. Chapters Four and Five then discuss the responsivenes of his spiritual vision in an age when the divide between science and religion, and matter and spirit, must be bridged. As another approach to ultimate reality, the poiesis of birdwatching is where science and religion come together in the awareness of a greater unity. In these three chapters the poiesis of birdwatching encompasses Thomas’s response to the unfolding and self-disclosing (physis) of the Divine as the unknowable, undelimitable, and sacred ground of being. Physis, as Heidegger notes, the “highest” form of poiesis (“The Question Concerning Technology” 317). Accordingly, Thomas’s attraction to the wild – to “that which is not a matter of human control and in which, ultimately, we are completely dependent, embedded” (Clark 57) – is fundamental to his poietic approach.
In light of this, one might see a “call” to birdwatching as a call to action across Thomas’s writing; a call to poiesis and dwelling in embodied and spiritual ways. There is a call to the nature within us which, by concealing the world, we conceal from ourselves. There is a call to new religious perspectives which revalue an otherwise desacralized and exploitable earth and affirm human connection to it as material and spiritual beings. There is a call to the unity of Wales as the unity of humanity and nature in the face of global technological colonialism.

Birdwatching is Thomas’s model and metaphor for ways of being-in and seeing the world. Birdwatching affords the poietic qualities of “imagination and intuition and a mystical attitude” which he says are vital (“Unity” 33). “We are becoming so conditioned by the scientific view of things,” he explains, “that we are in danger of accepting as truth only an experiment that can be repeated; that is, of accepting as true only that which can be proved” (“Probings” 45). The emphasis on such knowledge at the expense of other forms of knowing blocks the way to the Open, and perpetuates the separation of matter and spirit, nature and human. In turn, the “presumption of . . . [man’s] own apartness from nature,” as Jonathan Bate explains, “is the prime cause of the environmental degradation of the earth” (36). Thus, as Thomas suggests,

[t]he scientist
brings his lenses to bear and unity
is fragmented. It is the hand saying
it is not of the body, leaving it
to the poet, playing upon his timeless
instrument, to call all things back
into . . . orbit about the one word. (“First Person,” CLP 142, emphasis added)

One can say the same of the poiesis of birdwatching. As Thomas writes in another poem where he struggles not with science but the limitations posed by conventional religion,

It was easier to come out with you
into the fields, where birds made no claim
on my poor knowledge and flowers grew
with no thought but to declare God. (“Indoors,” UP 51)

Accordingly, as his birdwatching experiences show, Thomas’s perception of the material and spiritual unity of being is timely given growing trends towards new, holistic ways of looking at the earth. The sentiments of the ecologist John Stewart Collis, quoted here from an equally apposite essay by Wendell Berry, aptly summarise this cultural moment:

The next stage is not a belief in many gods. It is not a belief in one god. . . . It is an extension of consciousness so that we may feel God, or, if you will, an experience of harmony, an intimation of the Divine, which will link us again with animism, the experience of unity lost at the in-break of self-consciousness.

This will atone for our sin (which means separation); it will be our at-one-ment. (“A Secular Pilgrimage” 408)

On this note, perhaps the relatively recent renewal of public interest in birdwatching and nature writing can be attributed to such cultural developments – especially in the wake of the ongoing loss of nature and with it intimations of the Divine. Certainly, Bron Taylor explores the rise of various
“dark green religions” which “consider[] nature to be sacred” (ix).

“[T]raditional religions with their beliefs in nonmaterial divine beings are in decline,” he agrees, while “new perceptions, both explicitly and implicitly religious, have filled the cultural niches where traditional religious beliefs have come to be seen as less plausible” (x). These kinds of “perceptions” and spiritual sentiments have, of course, been common to birdwatchers since at least the Romantic period. Maybe birdwatching has an important role to play in our on-going ecological endeavours.

As this study of one prolific birdwatcher has tried to demonstrate, birdwatching – the kind which does not seek to record “facts” but “[t]o have them about myself,” as Thomas puts it in “The Place” (CP 207) – may provide unique opportunities to go out and be in the world as embodied, imaginative, and spiritual beings. Perhaps birdwatching naturally yields itself to poiesis as a practice and response to the self-disclosing of the earth within experiences of unity. After all, the birdwatcher must be open to revelation, silently wakeful but “safely without thought,” to quote Wendell Berry (“The Thought of Something Else,” New Collected Poems 59). The birdwatcher must wait upon the bird like the Divine; it does not come to his call or ordering of the universe. As in “Watching,” it will not be “compelled” by thought, it resists the thought which would predetermine and construct its being. Indeed, birds are – to paraphrase Leonard Lutwack – especially meaningful for being simultaneously familiar and transcendent (xi). As countless poets and birdwatchers have claimed, birdwatching also leads to flights of transcendence, of “at-one-ment.”

Moreover, birds are especially important, as Tim Dee notes in his Foreword to The Poetry of Birds, “in a world ever-more mediated and
increasingly depleted of species” (Armitage and Dee xix). Birdwatching is a vital response to the widening separation of nature and culture. It “reminds us that it is possible to get close to birds in all sorts of ways” and that paying attention to “the birds we see all about us with our naked eyes” is an immediate, accessible way to experience the wild world that is all around us. As the eminent naturalist Mark Cocker notes in his William Condry Memorial Lecture (an annual lecture series which R. S. Thomas first suggested as a way to commemorate his birdwatching friend):

any loss of birds in the external environment carries with it implications that are inwards, difficult to measure but fundamentally part of the process. Essentially when we lose life we lose a part of what it means to be human and essential parts of the vocabulary by which we express our relations to other species and to the whole of life. (2)

Perhaps Thomas’s call to birdwatching is a call we might answer, a way to get “[a] little closer to nature’s heart,” as he suggests in “The Minister” (CP 46). His experiences prove his belief that in finding “something to love” one becomes “fitted for wider and deeper affections” (“Preface” to The Batsford Book of Country Verse 7-8). Through birdwatching one might re-experience that “far summer” in which the “rare bird” appeared. If he looks with the innocence and curiosity of a child, the birdwatcher may see not the stars’ “remoter storms” but the eternity that is here on earth, asleep

Under the smooth shell
Of eggs in the cupped nest
That mock the faded blue
Of your remoter heaven. (“Children’s Song,” CP 56)
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Appendix

The full text of Thomas’s untitled and unpublished poem, which is referred to by its first line as “It was the sort of conversation,” is given below. A scanned copy of the original poem was kindly provided to me in personal correspondence with Professor Tony Brown of Bangor University, which houses the original manuscript in its archives.

The original manuscript is written in the poet’s hand and somewhat difficult to read. The transcript below has been reproduced in consultation with Professor Brown, who notes that “[t]his is still evidently a working draft and typically, as [Thomas] writes, the punctuation is not always quite finite/finished” (“Re: Inscrutable Handwriting”). The final line potentially reads “. . . as eyes closed” or “. . . us eyes closed,” but the handwriting is unclear and the poem appears to be unfinished. However, “us” makes more immediate sense in this instance, especially as Brown notes that “slightly unusually [Thomas] is not on his own here: it is ‘we’ / ‘us’ throughout [the poem].”

Our queries and assumptions regarding words, lines, proofreading and punctuation are indicated by square brackets. The crossings-out are Thomas’s own.
It was the sort of conversation
we were present at and listened to
but could make nothing
at all of. Yet we enjoyed it
as who wouldn’t. Trees with their leaves
clasped as in a green prayer,

birds singing fragrantly among the
the branches. Flowers with bird voices. It was like a reception
in our honoured we paused on the threshold
of unable or unwilling to believe
we were invited. It became clear
the whole sky was a face
tenderly inclined, thoughtful with cirrus.

We could play like children
in its sunlight yet come to maturity
under the quality of its concern.
I looked at you in the dawn
of an understanding that here
was a presence that was neither human
nor inhuman but beyond both
in its ability to gaze on [us / as] eyes closed

(Unpublished and unfinished manuscript by R. S. Thomas, Bangor University Archives)
Author/s: Quine, Joseph Allen

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