R.S. Thomas: Poetic Horizons

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Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2014
The School of Culture and Communication
The University of Melbourne

Produced on archival quality paper
Abstract

This thesis engages with the poetry of R.S. Thomas. Surprisingly enough, although acclaim for Thomas as a major figure on the twentieth century's literary scene has been growing perceptibly, academic scholarship has not as yet produced a full-scale study devoted specifically to the poetic character of Thomas’s writings. This thesis aims to fill that gap. Instead of mining the poetry for psychological, social, or political insights into Thomas himself, I take the verse itself as the main object of investigation.

My concern is with the poetic text as an artefact. The main assumption here is that a literary work conveys its meaning not only via particular words and sentences, governed by the grammar of a given language, but also through additional artistic patterning. Creating a new set of multi-sided relations within the text, this “supercode” leads to semantic enrichment. Accordingly, my goal is to scrutinize a given poem’s artistic organization by analysing its component elements as they come together and function in a whole text.

Interpretations of particular poems form the basis for conclusions about Thomas’s poetics more generally. Strategies governing his poetic expression are explored in relation to four types of experience which are prominent in his verse: the experience of faith, of the natural world, of another human being, and of art. In the process, the horizons of Thomas’s poetic style are sketched, encompassing a lyrical verse which is also a verse given over to reflection. In this study, his poetry emerges as personal and based on individual experience; however, that experience is at the same time accorded a more universal dimension.

By way of conclusion, the present thesis sets Thomas’s writing within the context of literary tradition, highlighting his connections with Romanticism, seventeenth-century poetry, Modernist verse, and other literary movements. This study highlights the fact that Thomas’s literary models are still poorly understood. Examinations of his poetics are important for a fuller understanding of the poet’s achievement in literary history. In offering the first overview of Thomas’s poetic strategies, this thesis lays the groundwork for such future explorations.
**Declaration**

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my 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 tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Karolina Alicja Trapp (2014)
Acknowledgements

I would like to express gratitude to my supervisors, Professor Deirdre Coleman and Professor Chris Wallace-Crabbe. Their constructive advice and guidance were vital to the development of this project. The R.S. Thomas Study Centre at Bangor University provided access to much of the research material that has stimulated my thought. This thesis owes also a great deal to Professor Andrzej Zgorzelski, whose critical discussions of verse have long inspired me and proved formative in many ways. In a sense, he opened the door on the world of poetry for me. Closer to home, this thesis would not have come into being were it not for the encouragement from my family and friends. By listening readily, they helped me transform my tangled ideas into an organised argument that forms this thesis. Special thanks, however, are due to my husband, who gave me his unwavering support through all the ups and downs of a PhD project. Expressing fully my debt to him would be impossible.
# Table of Contents

Abbreviations ................................................................................................................. 1  
Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 2  
Chapter 1: Faith and Experience .................................................................................. 26  
Chapter 2: On Nature ...................................................................................................... 65  
Chapter 3: People in Experience .................................................................................... 102  
Chapter 4: The Experience of Art .................................................................................. 139  
Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 200  
Works Cited ...................................................................................................................... 213
Abbreviations

Abbreviations of Thomas’s works:

AL  An Acre of Land
BHN  Between Here and Now
CP  Collected Poems 1945-1990
CT  Counterpoint
CWS  “The Creative Writer’s Suicide”
F  Frieze
IT  Ingrowing Thoughts
LP  Later Poems
MHT  Mass for Hard Times
ML  “Miraculous Lives”
NTF  No Truce with the Furies
PBRV  “Introduction to The Penguin Book of Religious Verse”
R  Residues
SF  The Stones of the Field
SPr  R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose
UP  Uncollected Poems
WIW  What Is a Welshman?

Other abbreviations:

COCEL  The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature
OCEL  The Oxford Companion to English Literature
ODLT  The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms
OED  The Oxford English Dictionary
Introduction

And the mind,
then, weary of the pilgrimages
to its horizons

(R.S. Thomas, “Cures” CP 529)

Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external power a dominion over thoughts. If words be not . . . an incarnation of thought but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments . . . which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on.

(William Wordsworth, Prose Works 84-85)

The motif of an ever-elusive horizon recurs with striking frequency throughout R.S. Thomas’s oeuvre. Its primary sense of boundary is expanded in his poetry by way of an underlying drive for an intellectual-cum-spiritual journeying, and for feeling, pushing and challenging diverse types of borders. The brims of orison, the confines of the human condition vis-à-vis the infinite Deity, the range of the speaker’s voice and the restrictions of grammar become some of the many tested horizons in what also constitutes Thomas’s forays to the bounds of language. For a poet, experience – whatever it may be – is always mediated verbally. In as much as Thomas communicates that experience in verse, his field of exploration is also a poetic one: at its origins, the journey is above all a search for appropriate expression.¹ It is with

¹ Thomas made this clear by constantly reminding us of the effort that the creative process involves, as he does in “Words and the Poet”: “In the act of composition every critical faculty of the poet is at
these basic horizons, poetic horizons sensu stricto, that I am concerned in the following study. In other words, the primary purpose of this thesis is to bring under scrutiny Thomas’s poetics, by engaging with his artistic strategies of conveying experience.

In undertaking this topic, I wish to go back to the forgotten roots, as well as broadening the horizons of enquiry on Thomas’s verse. Introducing his critical biography of Thomas, Justin Wintle identifies its origins as an “attempt to seize up a prodigious and controversial figure” (xiii) who “has often appeared to the public as an eccentric, even perverse” person, not least because “[a]nyone who is a poet and an Anglican priest and a Welsh nationalist must, to the casual contemporary English or anglicized Welsh onlooker at least, seem definably odd” (xiv). Tellingly, the book bears the title of Furious Interiors: Wales, R.S. Thomas and God. Pinpointing this poetry’s connection to religion and nationality as areas of curiosity for (potential or actual) readers, Wintle’s comment provides an indication of the key issues underpinning the reception of this poetry. So far, scholarly commentary has circled principally around his faith, or – sometimes drawing its nourishment from postcolonialism – has sought to clarify the relationship between his (predominantly English-language) writings and Wales.

In spite of such uniformity of interest, reception of Thomas’s verse seems to be at its core marred by contention. “Thomas's greatness as a poet [mostly lies] in the establishment of a sustained body of lyric poetry of an austerely rigorous work, choosing, refining, rejecting. Le mot juste! How much of the poet’s time is taken up . . . in seeking the right, the best, the most characteristic word, noun or adjective. . . . It is worth remembering, when we read a poem and take for granted the felicitous phrasing, the happy choice of word or rhyme, that the so-called inspiration which produced it, was often as much due to the many hours of hard work and thought, as it was to instinct” (73).

2 Cf. also Neil Corcoran’s conclusion that Thomas “had two preoccupying themes: rural Wales and his difficult relationship with the Christian God” (74). For discussions of Thomas’s religious positions specifically, see for instance Barry Morgan Strangely Orthodox, A.M. Allchin “Poetry,” William J. McGill Poets’ Meeting, or William V. Davis “Apocalyptic Mode.” Research focusing on nationality issues includes M. Wynn Thomas’s “For Wales,” Ned Thomas’s “R.S. Thomas and Wales,” Barbara Hardy’s “Region and Nation,” or Daffyd Elis Thomas’s “Image of Wales,” to name just a few. These two concerns occasionally combine in and/or are completed with considerations of the poet’s outlooks on urban civilisation, science and the natural world – William V. Davis’s “Quarrel with Technology,” Ned Thomas’s “Question about Technology,” John Pikoulis’s “Scientific Revolution,” as well as Marie-Therese Castay’s “Nature,” provide several examples of this approach.
quality, which in its entirety constitutes a penetrating enquiry [emphasis mine] into the nature of human existence and belief,” Ian Gordon concludes in The Literary Encyclopedia. A similar view is shared by Julian Gitzen, who calls Thomas’s poems “quizzical” (179), in the sense that they abound in “unanswerable queries” (179), a quality “appropriate in poems contemplating vast and intangible subjects” (178). The critic complains about the poet’s “frustrating tendency to forget or ignore gains made in previous inquiries and to commence fresh poems on the assumption that he remains as far as ever from his elusive quarry” (179). This conviction with regard to the querying quality in Thomas’s poetic writings and of his never-satisfied craving for answers stands in striking opposition to Jim Ewing’s irritation – confessed in his review of the 1986 edition of The Poems of R.S. Thomas – with the speaker’s supposed didacticism and omniscience, omniscience which even “extends to God” (122).

Thomas’s writing has been characterized alternately as mystical (for instance by Anthony Conran in an article devoted specifically to this issue) and not mystical (Gitzen 171); orthodox (Countryman, Barry Morgan) and “by no means . . . orthodox” (Gitzen 171); pastoral (Heaney 13) and antipastoral (Corcoran 75, Heys 69 and passim). While Gitzen and Jeremy Hooker refuse to acknowledge the vitality of Christ in this poetry, Barry Morgan maintains that Thomas’s “theology is in the end a Christocentric one. . . . For the poet, if people want an insight into the nature of God, they can only find it in the crucified Jesus” (46). Some critics are of the opinion that Thomas’s poetry is indebted to Romanticism; others claim the opposite. Alistair Heys, for instance, belongs to the first camp, as does Edna Longley, who – not least because of the poet’s anti-urban attitudes – places Thomas within the Romantic-Celtic tradition (609-12). In contrast, Belinda Humfrey believes Thomas to exhibit an anti-Romantic vein, seeing him rather closer to earlier, seventeenth-century religious poets of Wales, such as Traherne, Herbert and Vaughan (163-66). In an article of 1994, Ian Gregson accuses Thomas’s poetry of irrelevance “to issues currently concerning Western culture in general” and “to anyone brought up with television” (23, 22). Gregson’s accusations are countered by John Ackerman, who insists that “R.S. Thomas [is] a Poet for Our
Time.” Although Heys (23) and Christopher Morgan (3 and *passim*) consider metaphor to be the supreme means of poetic expression for Thomas, Gitzen contends that “Thomas’s recent work is transparently poetry of direct statement in which descriptive images and metaphors take a subsidiary part” (177).

Naturally, such critical disagreements can partly be explained by differences in terminology and by which texts are chosen for scrutiny. When Neil Corcoran speaks of Thomas’s simple diction (74), for instance, he clearly does not have in mind his poems featuring chemical symbols (“Two Views of Olympos” R 37-38), mathematical equations (“Sonata in X” MHT 81-85), and specialised terms such as “strontium” (“Reply” CP 528), “tricyano-aminopropene” (CT 55), “leptons” (“Bleak Liturgies” MHT 59-63), or “parthenogenesis” (“Heretics” NTF 29). Focusing on a few selected poems is of course hardly avoidable in critical practice, especially if the study takes the form of a paper rather than the scope of a book. In many cases, however, it seems to me that clashes of opinions like those mentioned above occur because of certain methodological weaknesses.

One of these is the inclination towards spurious labelling, which defies the complexity and uniqueness of an artefact – a creation often drawing from a number of traditions simultaneously while also transforming them in the process. Other problems haunting research on Thomas can be attributed to the thematic and/or biographical lens through which his poetry is brought into focus. This critical preoccupation usually comes at a cost: considerations of themes supersede in-depth textual analysis. Poetic technique is understood as a matter of adornment, contributing to the beauty of expression but semantically superfluous, or at least endowed with lesser importance. Given its premises, thematic approach seems thus to give a new lease of life to the old concept of “form” versus “content.” ³ As has been demonstrated in the history of reflection on literature, these two are in fact inseparable in a work of verbal art – a poet’s manner of conveying his message

³ We can see this in Wintle’s confession of his difficulties with “recogniz[ing] any formal poetic principle” in Thomas’s later poetry (391). Castay, in turn, suspects that an Anglo-Welsh poet’s “use of Welsh names is more probably the sign of his allegiance to the older Welsh tradition for which the intricacy of form . . . were as important as the meaning of the poem” (100).
plays an essential role in the production of meaning. In this light, to “read” a poem by considering only its themes is to risk ignoring parts of its semantics. Consequently, such an approach too often lends itself to the accusation of selective reading geared to buttress a preconceived thesis.

Christopher Morgan’s *R.S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity* serves as an example of this problem. In the “Introduction,” Morgan specifies the aim of his first chapter, which is to “argue that underpinning Thomas’s oeuvre is a ‘project’ in autobiography” (1). Similarly, he begins the chapter and its appraisal of Thomas’s chronological development as a poet by stating that

[1]he poetry of Aberdaron and later Rhiw is conspicuously ‘ingrowing.’ It depicts an altogether inward and downward metaphysical probing of the nature of deity and of the individual self. Of course in one sense Thomas has always been a poet of interiors, and yet it seems clear that the poems of the Aberdaron period contribute increasingly toward a sustained project in autobiography. (13)

More suitable as a conclusion, such statements surprise in the opening section of the book’s first chapter. Although Morgan’s following page seems to be planned as an examination of Thomas’s “This to Do” in support of this alleged autobiographical character, the reader’s expectations of evidence are disappointed, as there is no accompanying textual interpretation. Instead, the critic persists in repeating the very same assertion that the poem “is a good place to start, not only because it falls ‘on the cusp,’ as it were, of Thomas’s geographical move and a corresponding intensification of the autobiographical instinct but because it says

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4 The postulate has been of special importance to Prague circle structuralists, such as Roman Jakobson or Jan Mukařovský. It has continued so in the more recent studies by semioticians, with Yuri Lotman as one of the key representatives, and by other scholars, for instance those associated with the Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics – such as Benjamin Hrushovski (Harshaw). One might also note here that the identification of “form” and “content” has been propounded by poets themselves much earlier than structuralism entered the theoretical scene – one needs only to look at the Romantic conception of organic poetry. Thomas himself subscribed to this view, since he insisted in his introduction to *A Choice of Wordsworth’s Verse* that “a poem’s message is in itself. One can no more tear apart form and content in a poem than body and soul in a human being. The medium is the message” (126) (see also his essays “Words and the Poet” and “The Making of a Poem”). Indeed, the critics who still tend to speak of form and content often seem simply to fail to measure up to their own theoretical postulates, as they usually express an intention to avoid the disjunctive treatment of poetry as cut up into two separate “pieces,” so to speak. Barry Morgan, for instance, opens his study by saying “I hope that I shall not brutally separate form from content, the medium from the message in what follows” (15).
something about what poetry as autobiography is for R.S. Thomas” (14). Since it is
in no way obvious that this particular poem says anything of the sort (there is not a
word about writing poetry or autobiography in it), one cannot escape the
impression that the critic may be inscribing his own desired sense into the text.
What was supposed to be argued becomes here a premise on which further
theoretical constructs are built, thus situating Morgan’s argument as a case of what
Umberto Eco calls a Hermetic principle of total semiosis, “the short circuit of the
post hoc, ergo ante hoc” (Interpretation and Overinterpretation 51). The
presumption seems to be that an exploration of interiority entails one’s own
interiority and from here the link to autobiography is made. The question is never
answered as to how Morgan has actually reached his conclusions about the
autobiographical nature of “This to Do,” about the increasing “ingrowing” of
Thomas’s poems, whatever that means, about the Welsh poet being always “a poet
of interiors,” or even about the usefulness of addressing that aspect of Thomas’s
verse. As the critic’s own words reveal (“and yet it seems clear”), his propositions
rest on intuition. I, for one, do not see what Morgan sees, and I do not feel
convinced. 

Morgan’s biographical inclination is, in a general sense, representative of the
thematic leanings shaping much of the critical material on Thomas. Of course, all
artists inevitably rely on their own life occurrences, affairs, dilemmas and
fascinations in their creative production: it is hardly possible to imagine a poet
writing about matters he/she is has no knowledge about or no interest in. Thematic
focus thus seems to encourage questions about the possible real-life origins of a

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5 Further on, the critic proceeds to put “This to Do” in the context of other texts he deems
autobiographical, such as Montaigne’s Essays, the theoretical writings of Charles Olson and Wallace
Stevens, Seamus Heaney’s prose, and the poetry of Derek Walcott – hardly any of which have
anything to do with Thomas’s poem, as Morgan himself admits (13). As for Thomas’s poetry,
Morgan is mostly concerned “to suggest that Thomas’s ‘project’ in autobiography has much in
common with Carl Jung’s theories of the subconscious and unconscious” (14). Still, textual analysis
is lacking to substantiate the claims.

6 Neither is Daniel Westover satisfied with this critical procedure in scholarship on Thomas. He
deplores, for instance, the fact that “in the absence of close reading, critics . . . have had little on
which to base their claims” (Stylistic Biography 2).
given poetic utterance. Examining poetic topics often becomes a key to unlocking-deciphering, as it were, the author himself – his attitudes, opinions and values – rather than illuminating the text per se.

This is evident also in D.Z. Phillips’s *R.S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God*, a work which is – in his own words – a “philosopher’s response to the poetry of R.S. Thomas” (ix). On learning about Phillips’s intention to write the book, the poet expressed apprehension – proved correct – that “[t]he tendency of a philosopher is to extract the ideas for inspection” (qtd. in Phillips ix). As the study’s title reveals, its author is mainly engrossed in the problematic of Deus absconditus. He is attentive not so much to verse as to “the philosophical and theological implications of the [above] concept” (xviii). Phillips’s confident acquaintance with philosophical intricacies is certainly impressive; his treatment of verse, however, raises a few questions. It seems controversial to force poetry into the template of a given discourse and attribute the theme of a Hidden God to all Thomas’s poems. Material for discussion is organized here according to when it was written, which exposes the study’s biographical bent – a bent that is perceivable also in the scholar’s critical method. Thus his investigation of “The Peasant” centres on its creator:

There are times when the poet seems to commit the fallacy of thinking that in order for the mind not to be deemed vacant, it must be consciously posing large questions. . . . The poet is not denying that poetic, theological or philosophical reflections constitute a certain kind of refinement, but he is aware of the constant danger of such refinement being invaded by affectation. (3-4)

Phillips’s assertions warrant scrutiny and beg for textual support. As a matter of fact, one wonders about the possibility of proving any pronouncements proceeding from attempts at reading anybody else’s mind (such as hypotheses concerning what the poet was or was not “aware of”). The credibility of such reasoning suffers because the relation between a work of art and the poet’s life – even though

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7 In Thomas’s case, the biographical tendency might have been provoked by the easiness of dividing his life and works into four or five periods depending on his residence, and – as we can see in Wintle’s remarks on Thomas’s oddity – by the poet’s peculiar character and numerous idiosyncrasies. For more on that topic, see Byron Rogers’s biography of Thomas, titled *The Man Who Went into the West*.  

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indubitable – is too complex to be established definitively and seems therefore too risky a grounding for critical explorations of literature. Thus Roman Jakobson warns of the difficulty of conducting explications of literary texts through the prism of the author and vice versa, calling such readings “equations with two unknowns” ("What Is Poetry" 371). The possible analogies between the implied and the real author are of too poor interpretative value to warrant examination.

Wieslaw Krajka and Andrzej Zgorzelski provide an interesting context against which to see the scholarship on Thomas:

Many researchers in their critical procedures are apt to use the term “idea” to denote the general treatment of the theme. . . . In case of [sic] the literary research the notion of the “idea” is often dangerously close to that of “the intention of the author” . . . But it is important to remember that the defining of the “idea” . . . implies in practice the shifting of the research perspective: instead of studying the internal relations between the signs within the text, we tend rather to interpret the whole of the text as a sign. Such an interpretation is possible only when we discover the system in which the text appears semantically functional. It is usually the system of the given culture . . . (80-1)

These scholars conceive of a reading that aims at recognising and canvassing ideas as a

cultural interpretation of the text and not, strictly speaking, a literary one. Besides, the [cultural] interpretation appears in practice more strongly influenced by our overall view and understanding of the culture, than by our

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8 Cf. Stuart Curran’s remark that “[e]very time that a work of art is taken as a key to its author’s system of belief, there is a dangerous confusion in the principles ordering reality” (11). Treating the literary text as a source of information about its author, and attempting to elucidate a work of art by recourse to its author’s life have long been contested by theoreticians and scholars of diverse colours, the list including figures as different as Monroe Beardsley, René Wellek, Carl Gustav Jung, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault (even if their critique of the biographical approach is not always carried out with similar implications). Thus, John Powell Ward admits that he was, at first, “reluctant[t] to write a critical biography of R.S. Thomas” (11), and devotes a considerable part of his “Preface” to acknowledging “a reaction, in literary criticism generally, against the biographical and historicist modes” as well as justifying his deflection from his own principles (10).

9 I use Wayne C. Booth’s term “implied author” (from Rhetoric of Fiction) to distinguish the real author of the text from the author as implicit from that text, i.e. from his/her ordering of the supercode, from the selection of literary devices, from the choice of the title and subtitle, from meta-textual fragments, from fragments betraying an awareness of literary tradition, or from the selected genre conventions. In Wolf Schmid’s words, “implied author” is a category in literary studies for “the correlate of all the indexical signs in a text that refer to the author of that text. . . . the implied author stands for the principle behind the fabrication of a narrator and the represented world in its entirety, the principle behind the composition of the work. . . . It has no voice of its own, no text. Its word is the entire text with all its levels, the entire work as a created object” (167).
analysis of the semantic relations within the text. So, “the idea” often becomes a concept largely dependent on the given system of culture which the reader chooses as the reference system in his interpretation of the work . . . (81)

In a nutshell, the thematic approach seems to proffer readings arising from the cultural affiliations of the critic, and, as such, it is particularly prone to subjective bias. The indulgence of “critical reading” – thematic reading which relies on a chosen critical filter, so to speak – involves a “metaphorisation” of the literary text, as it were: a critic does not simply read its meaning, but “writes” (creates) that meaning himself/herself, and inscribes it into the text (Sławiński 377). While adopting a given critical perspective may yield some enlightening and thought-provoking results, it might also lead to reductive oversimplification (narrowing an artefact to a single-dimensional phenomenon) with a resultant twisting of meaning. Of course, achieving perfect objectivity is impossible. However, by elevating the cultural framework as their methodological basis, thematic readings can be accused of too strong a dependence on “[t]he largely concealed structure of values which informs and underlies our factual statements” (Eagleton 14), that is ideology.

In Thomas’s case, that ideology often assumes an overtly political shade. In a time of need for a poet or writer who could unite the Welsh-speaking and the Anglo-Welsh intelligentsias – something that Tony Bianchi interestingly pointed out in “R.S. Thomas and His Readers” – Thomas’s decision to define himself as decidedly Welsh (albeit writing in the English language) earned him the position of a national bard, and consequently made his poetry vulnerable to politically-


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10 Sławiński further elucidates: “Critical reading may practically ignore the original context of the work. Its senses are drawn instead from the context of the critic’s own ideological view of art, his tastes, postulates and ideals, set towards the literary present. . . . Thus, it is correct to say that the critic ‘metaphorises’ the interpreted text as he/she does not reconstruct its meanings as much as forming them anew and imposing them on it” [translation mine] “Interpretacja krytycznonoliteracka może w zasadzie zupełnie nie brać pod uwagę macierzystego kontekstu utworu. Kontekstem, który użyca sensów interpretowanemu dziełu, staje się program ideowo-artystyczny krytyka, jego upodobania, postulaty i idealy, zwrócone ku literackiej teraźniejszości. . . . Słusznie więc można powiedzieć, że krytyk jak gdyby ‘metaforyzuje’ interpretowany tekst, gdyż nie tyle rekonstruuje jego przypuszczałne znaczenia, ile kształtuje je na nowo, wmanow utworowi ”] (376-7).

11 I agree with Terry Eagleton that any effort at achieving pure objectivity is doomed to failure, and that every statement we can make is burdened with some underlying system of values. Nonetheless, the awareness of these hurdles does not justify a resignation from the goal of maximizing objectivity.
determined perception. At a risk of overgeneralization, Welsh critics tend to emphasize the regional aspects of Thomas’s poetry, whereas the English-speaking community in and outside Wales frequently counters those claims, by putting in the spotlight what Thomas owes to other poetic traditions.12

Thus, for instance, Walford Davies admits his political bias in “R.S. Thomas: ‘The Poem’s Harsher Conditions’” when he appraises the sound orchestration in “Country Church”: “my reference to ‘cynghanedd’ – the very fingerprint of Welsh-language poetics – is political as well as textural” (17). “Thick Ambush of Shadows’: Allusions to Welsh Literature in the Work of R.S. Thomas,” a paper by Jason Walford Davies from the University of Wales in Bangor suggests the primacy of regional literary inheritance in this poetry. London-born, Wintle dissents from Davies’s “exaggerated claims” (442), and points out that “[t]he poet’s handling of his Welsh sources reveals a mind of formidable refractive powers. But exactly the same can be said about Thomas’s handling of his non-Welsh sources” (444). Another scholar from Bangor, Tony Brown, rejects, in turn, Wintle’s discussion of “Song at the Year’s Turning” as rooted in Shelley’s poetry. He argues, instead, that the poem is – as the paper’s title advises – “R.S. Thomas’s Elegy for Dylan Thomas.”

To give another example, one might mention the polemics on the pages of The Telegraph in 2000. On December 5th, Charlie Methven – then editor of the newspaper’s column “Peterborough” – referred to Thomas as “one of the major British poets of the century.” In “Welsh Wordsmith,” a letter from 6 December, Robyn Lewis protested that the designation “British” would have been “anathema” to the author of “It Hurts Him to Think” (WIW 12). The following day brought another letter, from David Thomas, stating that the poet “was undoubtedly British, whether he liked it or not” and that he “was perfectly capable of writing in the Welsh language. If he regarded himself as Welsh, why didn't he?”13 These quarrels

12 One needs to remember that the institutionalisation of Thomas did not close the debate on whether a poet who does not write in Welsh can speak on behalf of all Welsh people.
13 The Telegraph also contributed an obituary by A.N. Wilson, which appeared on 1 October 2000 under the title of “Just How Welsh Was R.S. Thomas?.” For more on the controversies surrounding the reception of Thomas in Wales, see Matthew Jarvis’s book Becoming Prifard.
show how the thematic approach may result in poetry’s entanglement in extra-literary power rivalries, due to its propensity to depend too heavily on personal stance.

The last decade or so has witnessed some broadening of research perspective in R.S. Thomas studies. A trend gaining in popularity with critics is to consider his presentation of women, with particular regard to his wife, and, frequently, to pinpoint the poet’s fear of the other sex.14 Such interests impinge, for instance, on papers by Tony Brown (“Love’s Depths’: R.S. Thomas’s Poems to His Wife,” and “Eve’s Ruse: Identity and Gender in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas”) or Fflur Dafydd (“There Were Fathoms in Her Too’: R.S. Thomas and Women”). Increasing attention is also devoted to sketching his poetry’s relationships with Romanticism, or with poets such as George Herbert, William Butler Yeats, Robinson Jeffers, or Wallace Stevens.15 Recent years have also produced the first critical discussions of Thomas’s poetic technique. One of these is Damian Walford Davies’s paper “Double-Entry Poetics’: R.S. Thomas – Punster,” which offers an impressive overview of the poet’s sundry verbal quibbles. In “Irony in the Soul: R.S.(ocrates) Thomas,” in turn, M. Wynn Thomas is alive to the “theology of his style” (174). Finally, Daniel Westover’s R.S. Thomas: Stylistic Biography, addresses selected issues of prosody.

The above studies abound in valuable insights, as when Davies observes that Thomas’s “punning is both an aspect of [his stylistic] ‘spareness’ – a pun is language on an economy drive – and, given the polyvocality and ‘antiphonal music / in infinite counterpoint’ (MHT 82) of the pun, its very opposite; a pun is both

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14 In appreciation of a literary text’s creative nature, I prefer to speak of its “presentation” of experience rather than using the more common verb “represent” – the latter seems to me also potentially misleading, as it suggests a straightforward relationship between the text and a real-life situation. Cf. Robert Scholes in Structural Fabulation: “All writing, all composition, is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poiesis” (7).
15 Discussions of Thomas’s similarities with Herbert include Tim McKenzie’s Vocation and McGill’s Poets’ Meeting. Nineteenth-century inheritance becomes the topic of Heys’s Romanticism. The question of Thomas’s affinity with Yeats gained the interest of Damian Walford Davies (“Yeats Said That”). For the influence of Robinson Jeffers and Wallace Stevens see, for instance, several essays by William V. Davis. Finally, Sam Perry’s Chameleon Poet deserves mentioning here as bringing together some of the above and other strands in a single study of Thomas’s rootedness in the literary tradition of England, Scotland and Ireland. For more on various scholarly comparisons of Thomas to other poets, see “Conclusions” below (205-212).
frugal and fuged, laconic and Lacanian” (150). Or, when Westover states that “Thomas uses [enjambment] to create tension, surprise the reader and subvert expectations” (80). The critics, however, mould their commentaries in line with post-structuralist shibboleths, seeing the discussed techniques as methods to “pluralize and destabilize meaning and the certainties of faith” (Davies 151) rather than testimonies of artistic virility of language. Davies’s listing of puns does not contribute to an understanding of how these function within a given poem’s structure, or in his poetics. Instead, the poet’s verbal inventiveness is viewed as symptomatic of his personal “dualities and tensions at the heart of his cultural, linguistic and religious experience” (149). Accordingly, the scholar relates poetic equivocation in Thomas’s verse to Conor Cruise O’Brien’s remark that “the pun . . . is probably the best way to symbolize a state of mind torn by contradictions, yet desiring unity” (qtd. in Davies 152), arguing that the device in question becomes a reflection of the poet’s “fractured, hyphenated cultural self and psyche” (153) as Anglo-Welsh.16

Similarly, for Westover, the poet’s prosodies “are nearly always extensions of [his] psychological interior” (4), merely a “reflection” and “illustration” of his “destabilised” identity (91 and passim). Accordingly, the critic appropriates a given text as “poetic example” (75) of a given psychological issue that he deems to have been tormenting its author, such as “the barrier syndrome” (75) – Westover’s quasi-diagnostic term relating to the poet’s presumed impulse to keep people and things “at distance” (74). Rather than exploring Thomas’s poetic techniques as means of artistic expression, Westover appraises them merely as “stylistic corollaries” (116) secondary to the poet’s life, personality and thought.17

Westover is co-opting a critical procedure imbued with problems similar to those haunting the studies by Phillips or Christopher Morgan, namely a method of

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16 With semantic multivalence being one of the determiners of all poetry in general (as, for instance, William Empson contends seminally in Seven Types of Ambiguity), one actually wonders here about the usefulness of drawing such particularised conclusions as to Thomas’s personality from this trait.

17 M. Wynn Thomas’s commentary, too, resembles Westover’s and Davies’s in that it grows out of the conviction that “it is time . . . we appreciated, and explored, the cast of mind” behind the verse, which is the poet’s “ironic stance” (184).
manipulating poetry according to an assumption based on biographical information rather than offering conclusions based on reading poetry. This is striking, for instance, in his comment: “We can bring Thomas’s unease to our reading of ‘Cyclamen,’ another of his 1939 poems” (12). Westover’s interpretation is certainly going too far in his quasi-Freudian diagnosis of that brief poem on flowers as yet another testimony to the poet’s “anxiety” (13). Admittedly, the scholar rightly laments various critics’ tendency to surrender substantiation, but then he is often guilty of the same, as when he claims at the outset that “the style of [Thomas’s] poems was tied to the changing substance of his emotions. In fact, one does not need to read much R.S. Thomas to ascertain that the primary catalysts for his stylistic development were anxiety, resentment and a perpetual sense of instability” (6). Despite their merits, even the most current publications fail to break free from problems associated with the dominant biographical-psychologising trend in research on Thomas.

As can be seen from this overview, excepting the few recent critical publications, Thomas’s poetics remain, to a large extent, “a subject more often knowingly mentioned in passing than knowledgeably discussed,” to borrow M. Wynn Thomas’s words (“Introduction” 15). Surprisingly enough, although acclaim for the author of “Via Negativa” (CP 220) as a major figure on the twentieth-century literary scene has been perceivably growing, the realm of his poéticité still remains largely uncharted: as yet, academic scholarship has offered no study devoted specifically to the task of investigating the poetic nature of his verse.\footnote{One could argue here that the “primary catalysts” of any poet’s “stylistic development” would rather be his/her writing experience gained with time, familiarity with poetry by other authors and with the new trends in literature, as well as the very ambition to master writing skills and to become better at artistically carrying the message across.}

\footnote{One might add here that when critics’ attention is directed towards Thomas’s technique, it is too often in broad labels of defining his style, sometimes coming dangerously close to a catalogue. Wintle’s comments on the graphical layout, for instance, focus on its variety across Collected Poems, but fail to explain its functions in particular texts (or the variety of those functions, in turn, in the whole oeuvre) (390-92). The distribution of words across the page has consequences of creating new sets of relationships, setting up new contexts, and thus of enhancing their suggestive potential.}
Considering their predominantly extra-literary interests, it can also be argued that there are not only relatively few scholarly monographs on Thomas’s poetry in general, but even that there are virtually none in the area of literary studies as more strictly understood.  

This thesis aims to fill this gap. In spite of some neoteric theories toying with the idea of literature’s inexistence in forms other than ghostly apparitions of illusion and self-deceit, I align myself with those who – like Umberto Eco – believe in the existence of the poetic text as a specific phenomenon possessing its own “nature” and as distinct from other phenomena in the surrounding world. For myself, I read a poem differently than a newspaper, a physics handbook or an

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Other functions may include, for instance, suggestions associated with shapes (as with George Herbert’s “The Altar,” and with the poems by E.E. Cummings, Mallarme, or Apollinaire, for instance), or with directions such as left/right or up/down. For theory and examples of how graphical layout and/or other elements of the text’s construction may contribute to the text’s meaning, see Lotman Analysis, Zgorzelski Konstrukcja i sens or “Sound and Sense,” Hrushovski “Meaning of Sound Patterns,” or Hymes “Phonological Aspects of Style.” I use the term poéticité (or, poeticity, in its English version) after Jean Cohen (Théorie de la Poéticité) to speak of the qualities of the text which determine its nature as poetic speech specifically.  

The paucity of such reflection on his poetry is mirrored by the fact that the most comprehensive book on Thomas was written by Wintle – a journalist who has otherwise betrayed no interest in literature. Characteristically, Wintle’s tome opens with an assurance that there are “[t]hree things this book is not: a formal biography; an academic monograph; or the outcome of any collaboration between its author and its subject” (xiii). Other authors often similarly admit they have no scholarly ambitions. McGill, for instance, specifies that his book “is not an academic monograph” (Poets’ Meeting 6). The note on the cover of Barry Morgan’s Strangely Orthodox explains that the book “is not literary criticism in the usual sense, but rather an unpretentious summary of the poet’s recurring religious concerns.” Tellingly, many of those who contributed commentary on Thomas’s verse are not literary scholars as much as writers and poets (e.g. Davie, Heaney), journalists (e.g. Wintle, Rogers, Christopher Morgan), philosophers (e.g. Phillips), or theologians (e.g. Barry Morgan, Countryman, Allchin).

See Eco in discussion with Richard Rorty, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Jonathan Culler during the 1990 Tanner lectures (published as Interpretation and Overinterpretation in 1992). Rorty and other pragmatists’ cynical approach was rightly criticised by Culler as “kicking away the ladder on which they have mounted to professional success,” as paraphrased by Stefan Collini in his introductory chapter to the book (14). As much as I cannot agree with Rorty, I also cannot accept Eagleton’s assumption that the perception of a phenomenon is constitutive of that phenomenon. The sun never went around the Earth, before Copernicus or after, even if that was once the dominant concept of the universe. By extension, Eagleton asks us to believe that fried steaks and hamburgers are healthy, or that a koala is a bear, simply because the majority of people think that. His controversial assertions result from the dubious method of drawing conclusion concerning literature not from observations of literature itself but from observations of its notions in society and history. Thus, there seems to be confusion in the scholar’s thought about two distinct objects for enquiry. The value of conclusions as to one phenomenon drawn from looking at another phenomenon is questionable. Even if we were to accept his critique of particular notions of literature, Eagleton would only prove that we have difficulties with defining it, and not that “[t]here is no ‘essence’ of literature” (9).
announcement on the London underground. While poetic (as well as other) utterances usually fulfil a number of functions simultaneously (both culturally/socially and as communication processes), their literariness can be understood as linked to the dominance of the aesthetic – or, poetic – function. The present study adopts as its basis Jakobson’s notion of the poetic function as “[t]he set (Einstellung) toward the message as such, the focus on message for its own sake” (“Linguistics and Poetics” 69). To put it simply, it takes the literary text for its main object of scrutiny in order to examine how that text’s manner of imparting information compels the reader’s attention.

That manner enlists not only particular words and sentences (governed by the grammar of a given “natural” language), but also non-linguistic means, such as the number and sequence of strophes, division into lines, rhyme, arrangement of repetitions, graphical layout, and many others. This is to say, as Andrzej Zgorzelski did, that each literary text is semantically enriched by means of an additional superimposed organisation of signs, its underlying “supercode” (System i funkcja 18). The supercode works by creating new, often multiple equivalences between linguistic signs and their clusters, thereby involving an addition of new meanings to particular words (meanings usually absent from these words’

22 See Jakobson’s seminal essay “Linguistics and Poetics.” The poetic function’s dominance does not preclude a coterminous presence of other interlaced functions. Their mutual relationships in a text depend on a number of factors, including cultural trends and periods. The literary system comprises a spectrum of texts displaying varying degrees of saturation with aesthetic qualities. For more on the diversity of functions that a text may fulfil, see for instance Lotman Analysis (6-7), Culler Literary Theory (35-39), or Wellek and Warren Theory of Literature (15).

23 The notion of “natural language” is adopted here from linguistics, and from such scholars as Lotman (Analysis) and Richard Kuhns (“Semantics”). It is used in place of the less precise “language” to distinguish it from the so-called higher-level or secondary languages, such as computer-programming languages, artificial languages such as Esperanto, or the “language” of a literary work.

24 Given the dominantly semantic nature of textual organisation, I prefer to use Zgorzelski’s term “supercode” rather than Barthes’ and his followers’ – metaphorical at its roots – lexicon of “the second language” and “grammar” (see for instance Barthes’ Criticism and Truth 5, 31 and passim). In this particular aspect, in my opinion, Barthes’ terminology could profit from more precision in differentiating between language, code, and system. For the same reason, I also cannot subscribe to simple notions of literariness as restricted to “literary language.”
dictionary semantic fields) as well as to the text itself. That is, the literary text is a structure, an integral semantic phenomenon built of relation-bound elements, the sense of which emerges also from their mutual interplay, from the interplay of the relations between them, from their relation to the whole, and so on. As a result, a new meaningful whole is created, the sense of which is not the simple sum of the meanings of its particular components.

These theoretical conceptions carry significant implications for my practical manner of approaching Thomas’s poems. Central to my proceedings is the interpretation of a literary text. Interpretation as understood in the present study is not an attempt to “read” the author’s intentions. It is assumed here that a given poem tells us about a given existential situation of its speaker – his/her experience of a sensation, feeling, reflection, and so on. However, a text’s speaker is by no means simply identifiable with its author; hence, investigating such experience does not involve biographical interests. I equally stand aside from the poststructuralist propositions of intrinsic semantic “instability” or of the reader’s freedom to choose whatever meanings they want to see in a given text. While a literary text undoubtedly participates in a communicative process between the author and a reader, I find this process extremely difficult to examine, not in the least because of the infinite number of such processes actually taking place (due to the unlimited number of readers who have taken and will take Thomas’s texts in

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25 My use of the term “equivalence” requires some explanation, as it is used here in the sense of poetic device. Hence, for the purposes of this thesis, it is treated as a countable noun, and used in the plural as needed.

26 For the purposes of this study, I have adopted an understanding of “structure” which follows that of the Prague School, and of such contemporary scholars as Zgorzelski (esp. “Structure and Uncertainty”). More specifically, “structure” is “a whole [which] is more than the sum of the parts of which it is composed” (Mukařovský 3-4), and “a set of elements and relations” where “not only elements but relations mean something; they are semantic and as such they have definite functions in the whole structure . . . — what we imply is that the meaning is changed, or new meanings appear owing to the interplay of the many elements within a structure” (Krajka and Zgorzelski 19). Whenever the word “structure,” or its derivatives, appears in this thesis, it is in that sense, and not in the sense adopted by scholars of French structuralism, such as Barthes. I also by no means use it in the same way as Eagleton, for instance, for whom it is simply a synonym for “form,” as it is set in counterpoint to “what one might actually say” (3).

27 Accordingly, the theory of interpretation that I pursue follows the conceptions set out by scholars such as Eco in Interpretation and Overinterpretation, Zgorzelski in System i funkcja, and Lotman in Analysis.
their hands). In the following analyses, I only concern myself with the relationship between author and reader as inscribed in the text - that is, as textual categories of the implied author and implied reader. My view is that it is the text itself which, through its properties, decides upon its possible readings and upon the range of competencies that needs to be applied in perusal.  

The above contention does not, however, mean an “authoritarian” imposition of a single “correct” interpretation. Conversely, I largely adopt the view of William Empson or Roland Barthes that the process of literary communication involves ambiguity and a language of suggestiveness and polysemy, “the language of multiple meanings” (Barthes 5). It is my conviction that an interpretation of a literary text should, and often does, direct our attention to how diverse readings may arise. By the same token, the overwhelming multitude of internal structural relations – the richness and complexity of a literary artefact – inhibits the possibility of ever saying everything there can be said about it. As Jakobson notes, “a great poem can never be exhausted through any examination” (“On Intentions” 92). A consequence of this is that a literary scholar is forced by necessity to take the dominant phenomena for his starting point, or those features which govern the organisation of the text as a coherent whole.  

Thus the following interpretations take the form of explicative analysis of the supercode – that is, of the internal principles governing the text’s artistic

28 I should perhaps add here that I do not call for isolating a literary text, a method of the kind that was enshrined by the New Critics. As such, my argument is not against making use of biographical or other external material, but against making it the starting point that claims an interpretative approach. In other words, I am cautious of methodologies which risk imposing upon the text those interpretations made on the basis of factors external to the text before their relevance has been determined. A literary text – perhaps especially a Modernist or Postmodernist one – often relies on intertextuality. On many occasions, in order to fill in the resulting “gap,” which manifests itself through a lack of certain information in the text itself (Riffaterre 781), the interpreter is forced to search outside the text. However, in such case, it is the text itself which points to the missing bit(s), and which sends us to its external context(s).

29 An important part of my method in reading Thomas’s verse is to point out its semantic richness. For the simple reason that spatial terms appeal to me as more effective, I use the term of a “semantic field” – after for instance John Lyons (Semantics) – to refer to the sign’s semantic capacity.

30 Cf. Eco’s postulate that “any interpretation given of a certain portion of a text can be accepted if it is confirmed by, and must be rejected if it is challenged by, another portion of the same text. In this sense the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader” (Interpretation and Overinterpretation 65).
organisation. Such an analysis allows us to understand how the semantic enrichment takes place in a given poem. As Eco puts it, “[t]o interpret a text means to explain why these words can do various things (and not others) through the way they are interpreted” (Interpretation and Overinterpretation 24). Accordingly, literary phenomena are observed here not in an endeavour to elucidate their genesis as much as in a way which addresses the questions of function – that is, in their dependence upon the entire text.

Since the rules of the supercode are different in every poem we encounter, each time we must face the necessity of discovering the underlying inimitable patternings peculiar to it. The uniqueness of every poetic artefact needs to be acknowledged. Nonetheless, I am also aware that limiting my examination to a series of interpretations of single poems would turn this thesis into a catalogue, to no end – in the double sense of this word as referring both to boundary and to purpose. A structure itself, the poetic text belongs also to the hierarchy of structures: individual interpretations form the roots from which higher-level conclusions are grown as regards Thomas’s oeuvre as a whole, and its situation within the literary system more generally.

Distinctive as they are, experiences often carry similarities, and so do the poet’s ways of writing about them. This allows me to group Thomas’s poems under four headings, depending on the experience rendered and on the traits marking its poetic expression. Granted that, such similarities assume only the form of a tendency. A matter also of the poet’s style, homogenous characteristics permeate all his verse, even if they are prone to affect certain groups of texts more often or more strongly than others. Thus the proposed divisions are by no means a clear-cut classification. Rather, they are mostly pragmatic, unavoidable approximations

31 Cf.: “To discover what a literary language says we must discover the rules the literary language in a particular text establishes as its own rules” (Kuhns 92).
32 As Zgorzelski emphasises, interpretation is thus different from paraphrase, the latter being an act similar to a “translation” of a literary text into the own words of the scholar, an act failing to fulfil an explication role as it focuses on meanings without discovering how these meanings are generated in the text (System i funkcja 22).
33 The tension between the complementary opposites of interpretation and considerations of a whole oeuvre – it might be said, between langue and parole, or Schleiermacher’s Rede and Sprache – is an inescapable problem which confronts any study of poetic. Cf. Todorov (15-21).
necessary to enable the formulation of any research propositions. I strive not to label the poetry too strictly: poetic techniques and conventions are viewed here as an indispensable framework against which to appreciate the text’s artistic originality.

To be more specific, the first chapter of this thesis investigates Thomas’s major literary strategies shaping his religious verse – strategies of dealing with an “experience” of a transcendent God which is largely an experience of not seeing and not knowing. It takes a closer look at the poet’s heavy dependence on negative motifs (such as silence, emptiness and absence), asking about their nature and the manner in which they are employed. This leads to a consideration of the tension between the abstract and the concrete in Thomas’s poetry, which for the poet often acquires the character of an opposition-cum-equivalence between the spiritual and the material. Thus the poetic word seems to explore the enigma of two aspects of the Deity: the God who incarnated and revealed Himself to humanity as The Word, on the one hand, and the incognisable Absolute, on the other. By the same token, this strategy seems an indirect method of attracting the reader’s attention to the fact that speaking of God entails an exploration of the infinite in the finite means of language. Finally, the immediate context in which negative motifs appear is investigated. We can speak of a tendency to yoke conflicting elements in Thomas’s religious poetry: not only are abstractions and concrete motifs combined, but also negative motifs often appear alongside positive ones, the two bound together to form an oxymoron (or its kin, the paradox). Applied extensively, oxymoron and paradox become the major principles of the text’s poetic universe. Such tensions dominating the poem’s construction convey a sense of tension underpinning the speaker’s (in)experience of the Deity.

Another of Thomas’s main strategies in attempting to speak of God is one which “pretends” to speak of Him “positively.” My interpretation of his poem “The Hand” highlights the intricate network of crucial structural relations, an intensification of equivalences, which helps to present God’s perspective, as it were.

34 By “motif,” I mean a basic element of a literary work, which cooperates with other similar elements to construct a theme. See e.g. Baldick.
In poems like “The Hand,” the speaker’s voice hides behind a seemingly “divine” point of view. In this way, the reader’s attention is drawn to the fact that a given poem is an act of *imagining* God, based on subjective poetic vision, and not an actual experience of the Ultimate Reality. Granted, the poet’s faith does not find its source in direct communing with the Deity, as these texts tend to be intellectual: God is not experientially “seen” and cognised, but known *a priori*, assumed as an indubitable premise. Thus Thomas’s religious poetry tends to be poetry of reflection, closer to the tradition of poetic meditation rather than to contemplation (with which it is usually linked).

Chapter Two explores the poet’s ways of speaking about nature. Its first part attends to various motifs relating to landscapes, plants, birds and other animals in poems on diverse topics. I also concern myself with the poetic world model, in so far as it relies on countryside scenery. While these poems usually display a reflective character, the situation is slightly different in texts which take up nature as their principal theme – such as “The View from the Window” (CP 81), “The White Tiger” (CP 358), “Moorland” (CP 513), “Swifts” (CP 154), or “Sea-Watching” (CP 306). The closing section of the chapter shows how the latter poems deploy a multi-layered strategy of portraying landscape: how particular words turn pregnant with suggestions of emotional and numinous dimensions. A pivotal role is played there by the simile, which serves to introduce a governing equivalence and consequently enables ambiguity generated by the two resulting “contexts.” In this, Thomas’s nature verse reveals some affinity with this part of the Christian tradition which – according to Rudolf Otto – addresses the issue of how the Deity might be similar to what we know from our experience. Although never entirely free of reflection, these short descriptive poems are seemingly “uttered” in a moment of watching or listening, and to that extent are largely sensuous.

The following chapter, “People in Experience,” looks at the basic principles governing Thomas’s presentation of others. Considering that an encounter takes place in space and time, it would seem that it demands grounding in the concrete of a given occasion. However, more often than not, the descriptive or factual detail appears in Thomas’s text only to become a part of metaphor. Moreover, the
strategy of repetition of the same words, motifs, phrasings, metaphors and equivalences, as well as the similarity in various texts’ world models – irrespective of the protagonist – defy the claim of specificity. Metaphorised and repeated across many texts, circumstantial information no longer serves to root the poem in a specific situation. Instead, it suggests generalisation of the protagonist, who turns out to be a synecdoche for every farmer, every priest, and every poet – and all of these reveal themselves as aspects of human existence, human roles rather than specific characters. A further examination of several metaphors reveals that they tend to combine with one another, so that a metaphorical chain is created, leading from the circumstantial concrete to the abstract, and from the material to the spiritual. I argue that this technique, too, has universalising consequences, and helps establish these poetic utterances as reflections on the human condition. I close my discussion by way of asking about these poems’ occasional character in terms of genre conventions. More specifically, Thomas’s affinities to the sonnet, the bardic lament, and the ode are examined.

“The Experience of Art,” in turn, explores Thomas’s poems on various works of art. The main part of the chapter investigates his poetic dealings with paintings. I begin with a theoretical discussion of ekphrasis – viewed here as the technique of elaborate, detailed description – and follow on to trace the subtleties of its application in a number of poems. To show the spectrum of the poet’s approaches to pictorial artefacts, I stage a series of in-depth interpretations. By bringing to the fore the poems’ structural networks, this way of proceeding allows us also to appreciate how motifs from a painting are selected for the sake of semantic enrichment rather than pure description – and, thus, to recognise how the work of verbal art refuses to be bound by canonically understood conventions. Although the adopted method results in the chapter’s being longer than other parts of this thesis, a glance also at Thomas’s poems on music seemed to me a warranted addition – for, in spite of their being by no means insignificant in his oeuvre, their existence has so far been practically ignored. An analysis of “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” (CP 470-75) suggests that the poet draws from complex musical genres to compose
multi-themed poems – rendering what might be called “polyphony of thought” – and to infuse them with a sense of weightiness and gravity.

In particular chapters, I have pointed out some of Thomas’s possible literary models. Even so, the study concludes with a more sustained effort at a historical-literary synthesis, placing the observed traits of his poetics in a broader context of poetic tradition. My overarching interest in poeticity narrows my investigations to the matters of verse, excluding Thomas’s thematic indebtedness to the philosophical thought of Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, and many others, as listed for instance by Wintle (414 and passim) or John Powell Ward (9 and passim). Regrettably, I am also not competent enough to assess Thomas’s position in Welsh literary history – for these matters, I can only refer to the fascinating article by Jason Walford Davies, and wish that it might be expanded into larger format and even broader scope. Among other poetic ancestries, I principally highlight Thomas’s kinship with Romanticism, the influence of both Romantic theory and verse practice on his technique (albeit not on his concepts of poetry, an issue which has already been addressed by other scholars, mainly by Heys in R.S. Thomas and Romanticism).

The contribution of this study seems thus to lie on several fronts. First and foremost, it takes up an understudied object of investigation, offering the first book-length examination of Thomas’s poetics. By the same token, it can be seen as the first sustained, comprehensive scholarly effort at illuminating Thomas not as a Welsh patriot, priest, or personality, but as a master of verse. A new methodological perspective is also adopted in reading of his poetry: by examining the complex relationship between meaning and poetic technique, I believe I offer a study better attuned to the nature of its object. In this way, I also hope to free the poet from the limitations of superimposed classifications which force him into the role of an explorer of regional, spiritual and natural landscapes – and to open new paths for our understanding of his poetry and of its place in literary tradition.
Defined as a study of poetics, my thesis takes as its chosen subject only Thomas’s verse, and does not seek to engage with his literary or non-literary prose, whether it be essays, sermons, introductory chapters in the collections he edited, or his autobiographical works. Even if I do not hesitate to refer the reader occasionally to relevant prose, its connection with the poetry never forms an interpretative strategy here. This is perhaps most conspicuous as regards Echoes Return Slow, a volume fundamentally hinging on close poetry-prose cooperation and therefore also falling beyond the orbit of the present considerations. While poetic function may mark all types of utterances, it would be a task doomed to failure to attempt to investigate it adequately in all writing by a given author. By necessity, I am forced to attend to those works where poeticity dominates, that is, poetry itself. For the reader’s convenience, whenever possible, my interpretations of Thomas’s verse are based on texts from the more easily available Collected Poems (1993), Uncollected Poems (2013), and Later Poems 1972-1982 (1983), although I draw also as needed from particular volumes. I should also add here that, in my analyses, I frequently comment on meanings which arise from the text’s sound organisation – from the devices of alliteration, paronomasia, assonance, consonance, sound clusters, anaphora, and so on. I do not, however, expand these observations into an in-depth examination of the semantics of metre and rhythm in this poetry, for the simple reason that English literary scholarship has as yet to bring forth a theory against which such an examination could be carried out.35

Finally, a few explanatory words about the terminology used throughout this thesis need perhaps to be made, as for some readers it may form an obstacle to an understanding of the propositions laid out here. In particular chapters, I strive to explain my vocabulary whenever I feel my use of it might give rise to confusion or

35 Cf. David Rothman “Verse” and E.A. Levenston Stuff (2). Cf. also Derek Attridge’s explanations in Poetic Rhythm: “This book does not, however, offer a metrical theory, in the strong sense of the word. It does not attempt to formulate rules that would enable the reader (or a computer) to decide if a given line is an acceptable example of a given meter. No successful metrical theory in this sense has yet been produced... What is offered here is just a first step” (xviii). Although Zgorzelski has articulated some propositions in this respect, they have not yet gained a broader acceptance and require further, more detailed exposition – for these reasons, they can hardly be considered sufficient as a basis for a fully-fledged study of the poetic intersections between sound and sense. For more on Zgorzelski’s suggestions, see his essays “Sound and Sense” and “Rytm i semantyka.”
be perceived as breaking with the commonly accepted usage in English-speaking criticism. Given that my research is considerably indebted to theories of poetic text as an act of verbal communication, my vocabulary finds its roots to a large extent in linguistics, and in the structural/semiotic lexicon of scholars listed in the above introductory remarks, such as Lotman, Eco, Zgorzelski, or Jakobson. For more information regarding the academic “dictionary” feeding the following considerations, the reader might find it useful to refer to their works.
Chapter 1: Faith and Experience

In the introduction to The Penguin Book of Religious Verse, R.S. Thomas put forward his view of poetry as “the presentation of religious experience in the most inspired language” (65). Significantly, this formulation revolves around two key points – faith-related experience and its poetic expression – which form the central focus for this chapter. With an eye on those of Thomas’s texts that directly alight on religious themes, I engage here in an investigation of how the speaker mediates his involvement with the Deity.

In attempting his declared task of such “imaginative presentation” of “an experience of ultimate reality” (PBRV 64), the poet encounters a significant challenge and difficulty. For at the deep core of every believer’s universe, there lies the vital problem of God’s transcendence and unintelligibility, a problem that has generated continual metaphysical rumination, and that led to the emergence of theologia negativa, or apophatic theology. One of its founders, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, builds on the Gospel’s “No man hath seen God at any time” (KJV John 1:18) and similar scriptural statements of divine mystery to argue that cognition applies solely to finite things, existing as parts of our human realm, whereas the Infinite Absolute cannot be known except by divine knowledge. Similarly, Thomas Aquinas stresses that “man reaches the highest point of his knowledge about God when he knows that he knows him not” (33). The question then emerges of how a poet can explore the “condition of man’s relation to God” if it “is first of all one of not having, not seeing, not knowing, and not grasping” [italics as original] (Tillich 149)? In other words, paradoxically, how can the poet convey an experience of not experiencing? Nonetheless, as Ward notes, the effort to

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1 Thomas even identified religion with poetry when speaking of his two professions in a conversation with John Ormond, broadcast by the BBC under the title R.S. Thomas: Priest and Poet on 2 April 1972.
2 This argument becomes the heart of Mystical Theology, a major work in the Corpus Areopagiticum and an influential treatise in Christian theology. Throughout this thesis, unless otherwise indicated, all references and quotations with respect to the Bible are done on the basis of King James Version.
articulate such an unknowable God remains “perhaps the nodal-point of Thomas’s entire work” (112). My aim in this chapter is to gauge the major strategies which the poet, intrinsically a supreme language trickster, summons to deal with this quandary in verse.

To many critics, Thomas’s poetry is notable for its intense negativity. Vimala Herman, for instance, contends that his poetic experience is “peculiarly ambivalent, enigmatic and negative in tone” (710). One of the essential constituents for this quality in Thomas’s style is unquestionably the remarkable extent to which his writing relies on motifs connected with the Deity’s withdrawal, such as darkness, silence, emptiness or absence. Thus, in “Two Views of Olympos,” the speaker’s quick climb up the mountain is “to surprise God / at his absence,” a journey which ends in finding the place “deserted, or so I imagined / it from the silence” (R 37-38). Although the title locates that experience in reference to ancient Greek mythology, the name of “God” spelled with the capital letter betrays the identification of Zeus (or any other member of the Greek pantheon sharing their mountainous quarters with the supreme divine ruler) with the Christian Deity of Thomas’s other poems – such as “Adjustments” (CP 345), where, in turn, God is “[n]ever known as anything / but an absence.”

While a negative motif often describes God’s behaviour, as is the case with His “belabouring us / with . . . silence” in “The Combat” (CP 291), at other times it even seems to capture the essence of the Supreme Being (as observed from the human viewpoint). Whichever way one conceives of the implications with respect to his faith, Thomas refuses to remain satisfied with an acceptance of our never knowing God. Rather, he re-works the idiom of Christian humility to give it a 180-degree twist, so to speak, often going so far as to define God through His absence. Such assertions most often follow the direct formula “God is . . .” or its variants such as “He is . . .” and “It is . . .” in texts eschewing anthropomorphic depictions of

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3 Herman’s voice is seconded for instance by those by Richard Harries (68), or William V. Davis (“Theological Crisis” and “Apocalyptic Mode”).
4 By this I mean purely grammatical definitions. This trait should perhaps be seen as an instance of Thomasian probing through playing with a diversity of notions of God rather than a God-reaching “omniscience” which Ewing finds so annoying (122).
the Deity. It is through this method that “Via Negativa,” for instance, identifies the Divine with “that great absence” and “the empty silence” (CP 220). In “Migrants,” “He is that great void” (MHT 80). A similar metaphor can also be found in “Navigation,” one of Thomas’s flag lifeship forays and penetrations into “the obscurity / that is God” (NTF 65).

In “The Lost” (MHT 78) too, “shadows” come to represent the “Deity-as-revealing-Itself-to-man,” although the equivalence here is introduced in a more complex manner. More specifically, the motif is brought forth in a description of the protagonists as “[m]ourners after the shadows / they are deprived of” when

\[
\ldots \text{The Grand} \\
\text{Inquisitor’s countenance}
\]

is averted. Jesus’ too? The bread of the one and the freedom of the other

offer no more light

What attracts attention here is that the speaker refrains from naming God directly. Instead, he only hints at that identity, linking “shadows,” for example, with God’s traditional sign, the “light”; by mentioning Christ; or by recalling the biblical theme of Yahweh as *averting* His face and turning His back to the suffering Israel.

In another poem in *Mass for the Hard Times*, “[t]he leaves fall / from a dark tree, brimming with shadow” (“Winter” MHT 41). Apparently nothing more than a comment on the season’s natural way of things, the phrase also starts “brimming” with suggestive nuances, acquired in the context of a stanza articulating the Creator’s need for company:

\[
\text{The leaves fall} \\
\text{from a dark tree, brimming} \\
\text{with shadow, fall on one who,} \\
\text{as Borges suggested,} \\
\text{is no more perhaps than the dream God} \\
\text{in his loneliness is dreaming.}
\]

The otherwise enigmatic “shadow” seems to gain some clarity if seen in correlation with the tree, a motif which, in a sentence mentioning God, might perhaps be seen
as a modern off-shoot of *The Dream of the Rood* and thus as a figure of the cross.\(^5\) Read in such light, the “shadow” becomes also simultaneously a “foreshadow” of the bleak and “dark” future which awaits God after the incarnation, as well as signalling that God (in His second person).\(^6\) In a more obvious way, an adjectival noun is used alone to refer to the Supreme Being in “Nuance” (NTF 32), a poem which engages in reflection on “the two-faced god,” and which culminates in the conclusion that “[t]he invisible is yet susceptible / of being inferred.” Poems like “The Lost,” “Winter,” or “Nuance” show that a negative motif may appear sometimes on its own – without an explicit attribution of it to the Deity – and bring about such equivalence implicitly.

Of course, the terms employed by the poet to verbalize the Infinite are not always negative. To realise this, one needs only to look at “But the silence . . .” (CT 50), where God becomes identified with His “ubiquity.” Reminiscent of God’s address to Christ in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, as “Son of my bosom, Son who art alone / My Word, my wisdom, and effectual might” (60, III.169-70), Thomas’s “Aside” also speaks of “wisdom . . . at our elbow, whispering, / as at his once” (MHT 34). Perhaps particularly popular with Thomas are “love” and “truth,” the two appellations which keep popping up across his later volumes in poems such as “Strands” (CP 498), “Polar” (F 14), “I” (MHT 58), “Nant Gwrtheyrn” (NTF 66) or “To be alive then . . .” (CT 44). Looking at all these terms, it is evident that at least one of the roots for Thomas’s style reaches down to the Bible and to the traditional attributes of Divinity. Despite the seeming disparity, negative motifs in his texts are not very different in that respect. As Wintle notes, in Thomas’s poetry, there is a “cumulative effect” (83): this can also be applied, I think, to the aspect currently under consideration. Insistently repeated (even if in variants) across the whole oeuvre, darkness, silence and absence become God’s permanent characteristics in Thomas’s poetic universe, together with or instead of, but basically on a par with,

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\(^5\) It is in this role of the cross that the tree appears in Thomas’s “The Coming” (CP 234), “What Then?” (MHT 75), “Memoir” (R 13), or “Men go . . .” (CT 27), to give a few examples. Compare also “Not the empty tomb . . .” (CT 37).

\(^6\) Compare Thomas’s imagery of shadow in poems such as “No clouds . . .” (CT 28), “Shadows” (CP 343), or “Finality” (R 43).
for instance, omniscience or omnipresence. The poet seems then, on the one hand, to uphold the conventional manner of writing on the Deity through referring to Its attributes, a Biblical tradition familiar to his Metaphysical predecessors, such as Traherne, Herbert and Donne. On the other hand, he also transforms that convention in the process, by testing it against personal experience – an experience of a believer in times that are, as some argue, essentially inimical to Faith and drained of existential significance. The seeming scepticism of Thomas’s diction can thus be understood as an instance of artistic “defamiliarising” of a convention.

By the same token, Thomas’s technique here attracts attention in that it is indicative of a penchant to resort to metonymy, by making the given feature stand for the person it describes. This strategy brings us back to the Scriptures in yet another way, given that it is evocative of the Genesis story about the wrestling angel’s refusal to reveal the divine name to Jacob-Israel. Even though it engages terms both negative and positive, Thomas’s indirectness in itself highlights the fact that – for man in general and for the speaker in particular – the Supreme Being remains an unfathomed mystery.

One might also observe that the very character of these surrogate appellations is important for our analysis. Since God is referred to through a feature (love, absence, or other), a “person” is in effect replaced by an abstraction. This is symptomatic of a broader trend in Thomas’s poetry on religious themes, a poetry which is strikingly shot through with the abstract, even if that is not always limited

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7 Barry Morgan maintains that “[b]y confronting this question of the elusiveness and absence of God, R.S. Thomas is, of course, reflecting the experience of the modern age. . . . we live in a desacralised universe, where God is not seen as playing an active part in the world” (17). The poet’s approach towards a world of diminished spiritual significance is explored in detail by McKenzie (7-46). It is worth recalling here that the poet himself confessed to an aspiration to command an updated language in his poetic dealings with the challenges of modern man’s condition (Ned Thomas and Barnie 36-38).

8 The term “defamiliarization” was first coined in 1917 by Viktor Shklovsky in “Art as Device” to define “the very hallmark of the artistic,” that is the quality of an artefact to be “intentionally removed from the domain of automatized perception” (12).

9 Cf. “The Reason” (MHT 27): “Behind the word is the name / not to be known for fear / we should gain power over it.”

10 One needs to remember that Thomas had the choice to present his God according to another tradition, which relies on anthropomorphisms (for instance, speaking of the Deity as “God the Father”). His poetry’s indebtedness to that tradition is discussed later in this chapter.
to denominations for the Deity. Some notion of the trend’s extent can be obtained when looking at one of the poems from Counterpoint:

There is a being, they say,  
neither body nor spirit,  
that is more power than reason, more reason  
than love, whose origins  
are unknown, who is apart  
and with us, the silence  
to which we appeal

(“There is a being . . .” CT 20)

Given that the “being” of which the text speaks (the term in itself is nondescript and tellingly vague) can hardly be available to direct sensory cognition, it is clear that a delineation of spiritual “experience” in such conceptual manner helps foreground obliquely the divine intangibility and immateriality.

Much of Thomas’s writing on the Holy puts even the concrete to metonymic and/or synecdochic ends, often drifting away from the specific, the particular, and the material. One needs only to think of the famed motif of “the machine” which serves the poet as an umbrella-word for a broad range of phenomena relating to the contemporary highly-technicized society.11 In “Preference” (MHT 32) too, “articles / and upholstery” function as specimens of all those things that we hold in our houses, while at the same time working as metonyms for “domestication.” In “He atones . . .” (CT 38), to give one final example, “blood,” “arc-lamps,” and “needle” are not a part of any description of a particular situation, but become representatives of the generalised medical realm:

He atones not with blood  
but with the transfusions  
that are the substitute of its loss.

Under the arc-lamps

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11 See e.g. poems such as “Bleak Liturgies” (MHT 60), “Was there . . .” (CT 25), or “Soliloquy” (CP 230). The motif’s frequency in Thomas’s oeuvre has compelled attention of numerous critics. For a more detailed discussion on meanings that “the machine” acquires in a range of Thomas’s poems, refer for instance to Christopher Morgan (84-143), William V. Davis (“Quarrel with Technology”), or Ned Thomas (“Question about Technology”). See also the poet’s own characterisation of the motif as “a symbol for a robotic takeover” in “Probings” (Ned Thomas and Barnie 37), or his interview with Elaine Shepherd (excerpt in Images of God 116-17).
we suffer the kisses of the infected needle,
satisfied to be the saviour not of the world, not of the species, but of the one anonymous member of the gambling party at the foot of the cross.

On the other hand, the very effort of harnessing the concrete in the service of the abstract seems to testify to a certain tension between the two opposites, or to demonstrate a tendency contrary – while also simultaneous – to the one of abstraction, namely the process of reification.

Indeed, the poet conspicuously links the two in metaphors like “eternity’s window” ("Fugue for Ann Griffiths” CP 474), “bone’s truth” (“Apace” R 31), or “truth breathing” (“Aside” MHT 31); or he proceeds by inscribing the conceptual into phrases relying on the material, and vice versa. In “The Promise” (NTF 59), for example, “thought loses its way . . . onward to that illuminated citadel that truth keeps.” Associations attached to a stronghold bring to the fore the image of God as the Almighty. By the same token, Thomas construes God’s hiddenness as self defence, while presenting his relationship with man in terms of war manoeuvres (as yet another of his frequent transformations of the wrestling myth).12

A recurrent motif is of a hill or mountain (often together with the ascent), appearing for instance in “Stations” (MHT 16) or “I know him . . .” (CT 15). Here Thomas is indebted to the Biblical accounts of Moses’s communing with Yahweh on Horeb or Sinai, and to the later tradition of depicting the spiritual path to God as a climb up Mount Carmel (in St John of the Cross). Nonetheless, in a work of verbal art, the poet’s personal experience often interferes with tradition in order to enrich it with new suggestions. In “Perhaps” (CP 353), he takes a step back from the deserts of Israel to the damp Welsh hills:

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12 This Biblical story from Genesis (32:24-32:30) belongs to the most popular with Thomas: see, for instance, his Collected Poems for “The Combat” (291), “Emerging” (263), and “Service” (174).
His intellect was the clear mirror
he looked in and saw the machinery of God
assemble itself? It was one that reflected
the emptiness that was where God
should have been. The mind’s tools had
no power convincingly to put him
together. Looking in that mirror was a journey
through hill mist where, the higher
one ascends, the poorer the visibility
becomes.

We see how – displaying some observational authenticity – the imagery here can be traced to the poet’s roaming of Snowdonia, and to the area’s weather patterns. The experiential element is then interpreted with respect to the man-God relationship, where the “mist” provides an explanation for God’s concealment. While the traditional location of revelations is governed by the mythical significance of directions, up and down, towards the realm of heaven and the earthly death-bound sphere of common mortals, the hill in “Perhaps” is important rather in that it foregrounds the problem of difficulty, as does the citadel in “The Promise.”

Many of the concrete motifs used in this poetry serve the purpose of suggesting effort and hardship marking the sphere of human spirituality. Here is “The Answer” (CP 359):

Not darkness but twilight
in which even the best
of minds must make its way
now. And slowly the questions
occur, vague but formidable
for all that. We pass our hands
over their surface like blind

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13 Thomas personally admitted to have loved and walked the mountains and hills of Snowdonia in his “Autobiographical Essay” (4 and passim).
14 Compare motifs of “chasm” (“Space Walking” R 23), “abyss” (“Threshold” LP 155, or “Strands” CP 498), “the bottomless water” (“This One” CP 521), “the fathoms / of anguish” (“Fugue for Ann Griffiths” CP 471), and similar throughout Thomas’s verse. In “Over Seventy Thousand Fathoms,” Tony Brown observes that “the determined struggle against the sea for survival becomes in R.S. Thomas’s poetry in the 1970s and 1980s an image of the necessary resilience of the believer, struggling to maintain his faith in a supposedly loving God who is also capable of creating such a seemingly merciless world” (162). Thomas’s imagery of the deep seas and chasms to leap are – as Brown observes – indebted to Kierkegaard’s notions of faith as involving “constant and strenuous spiritual struggle” (165).
men, feeling for the mechanism
that will swing them aside.

In this poem, the meditative path to the Deity (see the motif of “minds”) is subjected to reifying metaphor, owing to the presentation of “questions” as material obstacles (“surface” and “mechanism,” which can be touched with “hands” and felt and swung aside). The imagery suggests their identification with – say – some kind of an automatic gate on the “way” (which, in this context, becomes a road literally). With its closeness to darkness, “twilight” contributes to the suggestion of the difficulty of this spatiotemporal process of thinking.

As the above texts reveal, the poet repeatedly resorts to delineating his search for the Ultimate Reality in terms of a journey. Partly, the roots for such imagery can be found in the old allegory of life as a sea voyage, recast specifically within a Christian framework. One recalls here as well that Thomas lived for a long while in Aberdaron, a village on the pilgrims’ route to the nearby Bardsey Island. Considering that, there is little doubt as to another factor which contributed to this particular stylistic trait – it seems clear that his poetic journeying is also influenced by the tradition of pilgrimages:

And the mind,
then, weary of the pilgrimages
to its horizons – is there no spring of thought
adjacent to it, where it can be
dipped, so that emerging but
once in ten thousand times,
freed of its crutches, is sufficient
testimony to the presence in it
of a power other than its own?

(“Cures” CP 529)

There is an island there is no going
to but in a small boat the way
the saints went, travelling the gallery
of the frightened faces of

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15 Bardsey Island used to be a major pilgrimage centre in the Middle Ages, and still remains an important religious site. For more on this topic, see the Bardsey Island Trust’s website Ynys Enlli.
16 Cf. Thomas’s comment: “Life is a pilgrimage, and if we have not succeeded in coming a little nearer to the truth, if we do not have a better comprehension of the nature of God before the reaching the end of the journey, why was it that we started on the journey at all?” (“No One” 106).
So I have gone up the salt lane to the building
with the stone altar and the candles
gone out, and kneeled and lifted
my eyes to the furious gargoyle
of the owl that is like a god
gone small and resentful. There
is no body in the stained window
of the sky now. Am I too late?
Were they too late also, those
first pilgrims? He is such a fast
God, always before us and
leaving as we arrive.

(“Pilgrimages” CP 364)

Such literary and cultural antecedents notwithstanding, the strategy of presenting the (in)experience of the Deity in space and time also seems driven by the need to address the issue of the transcendent Absolute metaphorically by attempting to
“translate” it into human terms. Daniel Chandler observes that “tropes” – which, for him, seem to denote all kinds of figurative language – “can be seen as offering us a variety of ways of saying ‘this is (or is like) that’. Tropes may be essential to understanding if we interpret this as a process of rendering the unfamiliar more familiar. . . . Figures of speech enable us to see one thing in terms of another” (124-25). Given that metaphor works by establishing similarity where there seems to be no such similarity in the first place, the deployment of the concrete to speak of God can be perceived as a strategy of “domestication” – which in Thomas’s poetry is not just a thematic reference to (striven-for) “taming the lion-like presence” (“Resurrections” NTF 47), but becomes also an attempt to verbally confine that

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17 Thus, in “Abercuawg,” the speaker confesses: “I am a seeker / in time for that which is / beyond time” (CP 340).
18 The above observations concerning Thomas’s manner of employing metaphor agree with Stanislaw Modrzewski’s definition of the poetic device of conceit in “Systemic Aspects of Conceit.” My understanding of “trope” in the present study takes its roots in linguistics, thus limiting the use of the term to those figures of speech which do not entail changes in the (syntactical or other) arrangements of words – that is to such devices as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche or oxymoron. As used in this thesis, the word is not a synonym for “motif” or “imagery.”
Divine Beast in the familiar, homely, small-scale space within which we humans live and feel comfortable.¹⁹

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Having investigated the interplay between abstraction and reification marking Thomas’s ways of speaking of the transcendent Deity, I would like now to bring into relief another element shaping the associated poetics. Irrespective of their metonymic roles, negative terms predominate as parts of metaphors in Thomas’s religious poems. “Passage” (CP 421) illustrates this tendency clearly enough, when it mentions the speaker’s “tolling [his] name / in the poem’s empty church.” A number of motifs are combined here and put to semantically-enriching mutual cooperation: firstly, the one of summoning (whom?) to the church; secondly, the personal, lyrical motif of announcing the speaker’s name in the poem; and lastly, the void in the church and in the utterance itself (all underpinned by the suggested affinity between the house of prayer and the poem, sacrum and verse). At least three distinct topics and manifold kinds of experience are thus embraced in one condensed metaphor.

Condensation also governs “I asked from my absent place / by love’s fire” in “Cadenza” (CP 415). In a poem about God, “love’s fire” evokes concomitantly two figurative ways in which the Bible spoke of the Deity: their merging in Thomas’s poem is probably attributable to the cultural association of the passion of love with burning and flames. Notwithstanding the Scriptural inheritance, “fire” also retains here its basic meaning as one from the fireplace and as a means of heating home. This more literal or situation-grounded meaning is supported in the poem by other circumstantial details, such as the mention of God “above the lintel,” with “face worn,” and a “chipped gaze,” which legitimates a guess of a small wooden Crucifix

¹⁹ The motif of domestication – in a variety of senses relating to the Deity – appears often in Thomas’s poetry, including “Preference” (MHT 32), “Gradual” (CP 411) or “You show me . . .” (CT 53). Compare also Thomas’s poems inscribing God into the body of an animal, such as “Not the empty tomb . . .” (CT 37) or “The White Tiger” (CP 358).
at the door.\textsuperscript{20} The metaphor in “Cadenza” works thus by compressing a twofold imagery from another text and denotations from cultural code and natural language, engaging a number of “themes,” suggestions and allusions concomitantly: sitting by the fire, the old portrayals of God as appearing in the burning bush, the notion of the Creator as love, conventions of writing on passion, the speaker's place next to the hearth, his absence and his position in relation to God. As we can see, the employment of substitute terms for the Supreme Being serves poetic aims: while essentially metonymic themselves, these often undergo simultaneous metaphorisation, enabling the speaker to strongly enhance the phrase’s suggestive potential.\textsuperscript{21}

A slightly different strategy is employed in “The Promise” (NTF 59). This poem stages a search for the Maker's traces in the universe via intellectual conclusion (“From nothing / nothing comes. Behind everything – / something, somebody?”), and culminates in an assertion of cosmic “emptiness”:\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{... Light’s distances}  
\textbf{are without meaning and unreconciled}  
\textbf{by the domestic. I pit my furniture}  
\textbf{against the emptiness that is beyond}  
\textbf{Antares, but the equation}  
\textbf{is not in balance. There are no cushions}  
\textbf{for the emotions.}

Echoing the earlier “nothing” (from which “nothing comes”) and the phrase “light’s distances are without meaning,” the “emptiness” refers in the first place to the cosmos, as “Antares” (a red supergiant star in the Milky Way) informs us. Since this void is set athwart “furniture,” the latter word becomes a synecdochic sign for all manner of means with which to fill the vacant space. Such an extended sense of

\textsuperscript{20} Thomas and Elsi refused to warm up to radiators and relied on fire instead. Mr and Mrs Thomas’ living conditions at Sarn, including their attitudes towards such modern inventions as central heating, are wittily described by Rogers (261-67).

\textsuperscript{21} The term “metaphorisation” is frequently used in this thesis to refer to a transformation of a word, a phrase, or a whole text into a metaphor or its chains. Such a term allows us to notice not only static poetic devices but also poetic processes.

\textsuperscript{22} Such questions seem to have their origin in a philosophical tradition dating back at least to Leibnitz's observations on “Why is there something rather than nothing?” (213). Cf. Eco's proposition (also building on Leibnitz) that “Here is what we mean by the word Being: Something” (\textit{Kant} 12).
“furniture” haunts the metaphor “the floor of the universe / littered with fragments,” which in turn institutes equivalence between the cosmos and a house. In connection with other motifs such as “floor” or “cushions,” “furniture” manifests itself as part of the metaphorical theme of a house in the poem – and, specifically, also one of the constituents of home. In other words, it metonymically represents “the domestic,” including the associations that the latter has with familiarity, safety, or family. Thus the contraposition between the two sides of “the equation,” namely the “furniture” and the “emptiness that is beyond Antares,” is in fact a more complex opposition of two dimensions. It is the confrontation of a micro-scale and a macro-scale, a house and the cosmos, and also of the associated “emotions” or states of mind: a sense of belonging and togetherness on the one side and, on the other, the feeling of loneliness, meaninglessness, and being lost in that vast vacuous space (“light’s distances are without meaning”).

It is crucial for an understanding of “emptiness” in “The Promise” to see it in relation to other motifs: each of the main elements of the equation operates on semantic nuances acquired through its play with various parts of the poem and with manifold verbal relationships. In poems such as the above “The Promise,” or “Retired” (MHT 23) and “Planetary” (R 19), a given negative motif forms a part of a complex multi-layered metaphor, the semantics of which depend on the context of the stanza and even of the whole text.

Yet another tactic used by Thomas is to construct his poem as a string of metaphors, although these are not necessarily related in any obvious way other than through sharing the same object of metaphorisation. Figurative statements based on the “God is . . .” formula provide a case in point as they tend to begin the majority of sentences in a given text, or at least they are repeated insistently enough to constitute the leading vehicle for its development:

He is the almost anonymous,
the one with the near perfect
alibi, the face over us that lacks
nothing but an expression.
He is the shape in the mist
on the mountain we would ascend
disintegrating as we compose it.

(“I know him . . .” CT 15)

Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.

(“Via Negativa” CP 220)

The cardinal principle of organising the composition (or, the flow of the utterance), metaphorisation provides thus a way of constructing an image of the Deity. In other words, although it is constricted with negative motifs, metaphor seems to offer an elemental means for the poet to attempt an enunciation of God.

As the title informs us, “Via Negativa” speaks of seeking God (while declaring the search “path” as apohatic). Clearly indebted to the Italian sonnet convention, this poem consists of two parts roughly analogous to the octave – which seems to aim at “defining” that God – and to the sestet, which offers a more explicit two-sentence long explanation of the consequences of His nature for us (in grammatical terms, the sentence subject shifts from God to “we,” or men). At the beginning, the delineation takes place through two kinds of metonymic identification. More specifically, God finds His correlate in space (“empty silence

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23 See also “There is a being . . .” (CT 20), “Near and Far” (NTF 46) or “That there . . .” (R 56).
24 Here, one recalls again what Thomas said of metaphor as a religious phenomenon in “Priest and Poet”: “poetry is religion, religion is poetry . . . the Resurrection and Incarnation are metaphors . . . As a priest I am committed to the ministry of the word and the ministry of the sacraments. Well, word is metaphor, language is sacrament, sacrament is language” (Ormond 53). He voices similar opinion in “Introduction to The Penguin Book of Religious Verse” (64-65) and in “A Frame for Poetry” (90). In this last essay, he asks, for instance, “how shall we attempt to describe or express ultimate reality except through metaphor or symbol?” (90).
within” which is also “the place where we go”). Simultaneously, He merges with the way He is experienced by the speaker (as an absence, emptiness and silence). Here “silence” seems to have a double edge as it belongs to both the Supreme Being and to the speaker himself. Furthermore, the synesthetic metaphor “empty silence” condenses two distinct forms of God’s nonattendance in the human realm, thus completing and reinforcing “absence.” One might note as well that the sentences of the octave consist of two parts, or a pair of metaphorical propositions about the Deity, who is both absence and empty silence, who keeps “interstices” and “darkness,” and whose “echoes” and “footsteps” we follow. It can be said that “Via Negativa” develops by way of “doubling,” in a sense. Such organisation takes place because, in syntactical terms, the poem unfolds largely through apposition. A primary rhetorical device of Biblical poetry, the resulting parallelism evokes the language of the Scriptures. Here, nonetheless, its function appears to lie fundamentally in provoking double equivalences – in strengthening the argument by suggesting synonymy of diverse statements concerning the Deity.

In the final sentence, enhancing the connection between the two parts of the poem and their subjects, a link is established between God and man through parallelism: the verb “look” is repeated and becomes an activity performed by both, and there is also the tentative comparison in “we . . . as though he . . . .” In this, Thomas harks back to the seminal idea of man’s being made in the Maker’s image although he gives it a twist again as ultimately we “miss the reflection.” What attracts attention here is the twofold sense of “miss” as referring to failure and to the emotional state of yearning, pining, and feeling a loss. Also the motif of “reflection” at the end of the poem seems to have multiple senses: it does not only refer to a sight of God, but can also be perceived as an autothematic comment in two ways. Firstly, the poem itself develops by way of reflection (hence “thought” in the opening line). Secondly, the word directs our attention to the poet’s technique

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25 One might point out here that “the place” of “silence within” raises associations with the usual “scene” of illumination in the introvertive kind of contemplation – that is, in that kind of contemplation which looks for God not in the surrounding world but in the contemplating subject himself/herself (for more on introvertive and other kinds of contemplation see Arthur L. Clements’s book Poetry of Contemplation. By the same token, the motif is one of the many in this poem to allude to man’s internal affinity to his Creator.
of creating equivalence by “doubling” constructions, a technique which thus relies on mirroring “reflection.”

Smuggling in autothematic remarks is by no means unique to “Via Negativa,” and the “equations” in “The Absence” (CP 361), for instance, can be brought forward as another example. Obviously, the poem plays with the metaphorical sense of the word as referring to a difficult problem. However, in the context of motifs relating to science, the more literal, mathematical sense of asserting the equality of two expressions is clearly also valid. The allusion seems to be made to the poem’s dependence on simile and comparison (there are as many as five instances of these devices altogether), on appositional parallelism (three out of the six sentences are formed in this way), and on the resulting equivalences:

It is this great absence
that is like a presence, that compels
me to address it without hope
of a reply. It is a room I enter

from which someone has just
gone, the vestibule for the arrival
of one who has not yet come.
I modernise the anachronism

of my language, but he is no more here
than before. Genes and molecules
have no more power to call
him up than the incense of the Hebrews

at their altars. My equations fail
as my words do. What resource have I
other than the emptiness without him of my whole
being, a vacuum he may not abhor?

“The Absence” is a poem worth pausing at, for its equivalences are less simple and more surprising in that, unlike those of “Via Negativa,” they are based above all on antonymy.26 This becomes clear even as early as in the opening lines, where, through an antithetical simile, the poet renders non-attendance synonymous to

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26 Cf. Thomas’s comment in “Words and Poet”: “It is after all so often the phrase, the metaphor, that is the kernel of poetry. But even in admitting this, we must allow that phrases and metaphors are but words in conjunction or counterpoint” (79).
presence, and makes it positively “compel” the speaker to “address” it, even if “without hope of a reply.” This tension can already be found in “great absence,” a phrase striking as it defies the usual unfavourable connotations associated with lack, with which the epithet of “great” would sit strangely. One is reminded of a certain tradition that uses that motif’s contrary with grandeur-bespeaking adjectives, namely the practice of referring to God as a tremendous presence.27

The trend continues in the following sentence, which equates “absence” with “a room I enter / from which someone has just / gone” and subsequently with “the vestibule for the arrival / of one who has not yet come.” Here, the similarity of the two locales highlights the polarity between the key motifs of “gone” and “not yet come,” spaced neatly as they are on the two opposite ends of their lines. Unfolding his utterance further and elaborating it with other contrasting elements, the speaker ventures to “modernise the anachronism” of his language: the phrase is based on its connotations of the present and the past, which help to introduce the topic of time in the search for the Deity. This theme is then expanded by way of the juxtaposition of contemporary science’s “genes and molecules” with “the incense of Hebrews” (the two are treated as divergent in the text, even though they do not necessarily have to be so). These represent and are also completed with implicit and explicit counterpoints bridling together the scientific knowledge-based pursuit of God and religious ceremony and prayer; the positive “resource” and negative “emptiness” or “vacuum;” and finally the “emptiness” and the “whole being” [emphasis mine].

Since appositional constructions give preference to noun clauses, an utterance which relies on them resembles enumeration. Emphatic quality resulting from such consistent, monotonous sentence structure is even stronger and more striking in poems organising their equivalences according to the relation of opposition, just as happens in “The Absence.” Here, this strategy highlights the spectrum of means tested, the totality of effort and of failure: no method and no period in history brings about success in luring God into a “reply.”

27 See e.g. Barth (243) and Rupp (89). Cf. also Thomas’s poems “Monet. Rouen Cathedral, Full Sunshine” (BHN 73), or “Van Gogh. The Church at Auvers” (BHN 65).
Marshalling contrasting lexemes to enriching cooperation would continue to provide a vital component of Thomas’s style across his works on Deity. By no means limited to equivalences instituted through parallelism, it is above all one of the features characteristic of his metaphor, which frequently not only couples the abstract with the concrete, but also often weds a negative element with a positive one. Thus, in “Revision” (CP 531), “recording” – usually of sound – is “of his silence.” In other texts, the speaker is found wondering if there is “a sentence without words?” (“Senior” CP 387), or trying to accept that the Deity converses “[i]n the silence / that is his chosen medium / of communication” (“The New Mariner” CP 388).

Given such technique, it can be observed that Thomas’s verse stands out as being crucially empowered by oxymoron and/or paradox.28 “Shadows” (CP 343) serves as a good specimen to examine this strain in the poet’s practice:

I close my eyes.
The darkness implies your presence,
the shadow of your steep mind
on my world. I shiver in it.
It is not your light that
can blind us; it is the splendour
of your darkness.

And so I listen
instead and hear the language
of silence, the sentence
without an end. Is it I, then,
who am being addressed? A God’s words
are for their own sake; we hear
at our peril. Many of us have gone
mad in the mastering
of your medium.

In the first stanza, a visual quality of the experience is spelled out by the motif of “light” and its antonym of “darkness.” The essentiality of these is underlined through their framing role, and additionally through the two related motifs of

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28 Cf.: “[T]he central subject of much of Thomas’s poetry [of 1980s] . . . is the complex relationship between faith and doubt, between a theology of presence and a theology of absence. His exploration of this area . . . depends heavily on paradox and ambiguity” (Vicary 100).
“shadow” and “blind.” In a manner quite similar to “The Absence,” the darkness – a lack of light being, after all, a form of absence – undergoes a positive interpretation here, and it “implies . . . presence.” A clarification is offered in the very next lines, elucidating the tenebry as “the shadow of your steep mind / on my world.” The metaphor is intriguing for several reasons. By virtue of an association of mind with reason, it harks back to the idea of Logos. However, based on equivalence between the mind and a hill, it also fuses that idea with a metonymic identification of God with a mountain. While thus clearly rooted in Scriptures, the metaphor at the same time significantly transgresses conventional ways of imaging God. For although God is usually the source of light, in “Shadows” the source seems to be placed outside Him. The contentious element in Thomas’s approach continues until the end of the stanza, where the speaker engages in a polemic with the Biblical allegory of God as light in yet another, more direct, way, in “[i]t is not your light that / can blind us; it is the splendour / of your darkness.” Effecting equivalence between light and darkness, the phrase also endows “splendour of your darkness” with the character of an oxymoron (despite no self-evident opposition between “splendour” and “darkness”).

The second stanza also leans heavily on that device. While in the first stanza the negative undergoes paradoxical transformation into the positive, here the purportedly positive elements of human communication are negated. Thus, the “language” is one of “silence,” and the “sentence” is “without an end” – although the rules of English punctuation demand that it be finished with a full-stop. This remarkable omission of a delimiter makes the “sentence” resemble the Absolute;

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29 In “Shadows,” the relationship with the Deity is thus spoken of in sensory terms: visual in the first stanza, and auditory in the second (“I listen,” “hear”). This sensuousness is also expressed by “I shiver in it” (in the first stanza) – the brief direct personal statement suggesting the cold of the dark shadow (see also “The shadow of the bent cross / is warmer than yours,” in the third strophe). On the other hand, the motif of shivering can also be explained by the tradition of depicting God as full of the tremendous divine “splendour” which fills the believer with fear and awe. For more on that tradition, see Rudolf Otto Idea of Holy.

30 Thomas’s imagery of light and darkness in this poem seems a twist on Henry Vaughan’s “The Night” and its “dazzling darkness” (289).
attributed to God, it assumes God’s infinity.\footnote{With all probability, “sentence without end” is an allusion to St. Augustine, for whom the mystical experience entails going beyond language, and for whom the end of illumination entails a comeback “to the noise of our human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an ending” (171, IX.10.24).} In other words, God’s transcendence informs the paradox and makes it “rational.”

Applied extensively throughout the poem, oxymoron-cum-paradox becomes the major principle of the fictional universe.\footnote{Compare the paradoxical intensity in the final question of “But the silence . . .”: “What to do / but draw a little nearer to / such ubiquity by remaining still?” (CT 50). See also “Neither” (NTF 58), “He?” (R 14), or “Near and Far” (NTF 46).} Adopting Michal Głowiński’s terms for kinds of metaphor, the “extensive” oxymoron or paradox becomes “intensive” (93-95). In other words, it is no longer limited to a single phrase but – expanded with other complementary paradoxes – it dominates the composition and grows into what might be called an oxymoronic theme. In this way, paradox becomes a fundamental means of considering God or man’s relationship with God, and the basic determinate of the experience rendered.\footnote{Cf. also the recurrent motif of madness in Thomas’s poetry – for instance in “Legend” (R 16).} Thereby Thomas brings into our attention poetically but insistently the problems inherent in cognizing the transcendent Deity, and the difficulty of expressing such experience. His is a strategy of shocking the readers out of the easy ways of asserting God.\footnote{Similar observation was made by Shepherd in her discussion of a certain group of Thomas’s poems on God (89-90), although – controversially, as I have argued elsewhere (see Trapp “Imagining God” 73-74) – with reference to thematic notions only.} As Christopher Morgan says, “the discourse of the via negativa is one in which words are continually denied their usual associations, in which language itself is ‘broken open’ to accommodate the possibility of its opposite value in paradox, a clear parallel to Derridean difféance” (179). Within the universe of a poem, these new antonymic associations and values, to use Morgan’s terms, become internalised, as it were, turning into ones that are “usual” in this universe. An intensive oxymoronic “theme” provides a unifying link and creates the background against which each of the single individual instances of oxymoron are illumined, “rationalized,” and explained, the tensions resolved.
Thomas’s strategies aimed at tackling the problem of God’s transcendence and unknowability are not limited to the poetic features discussed above, all of which could be subsumed under the header of the so-called via negativa. One would expect a priest-poet’s oeuvre to also encompass poems which depict God in positive terms, or which put forward some direct, more “constructive” propositions as to the nature of that God. Some critics indeed maintain that the poet engaged in exploring and devising imaginative hypotheses as to the nature of the Supreme Being.\(^{35}\) John Powell Ward distinguishes a number of texts which attempt a “description of God” (98), and aim “to render or evoke God in mythic mode though with a twentieth century orientation” (92).\(^{36}\)

To take a fuller measure of the nuances of this drift in Thomas’s verse, let us have a look at how it is realised in one such poem, “The Hand” from Laboratories of the Spirit (2):\(^ {37}\)

It was a hand. God looked at it
and looked away. There was a coldness
about his heart, as though the hand
clasped it. As at the end
of a dark tunnel, he saw cities
the hand would build, engines
that it would raze them with. His sight
dimmed. Tempted to undo the joints
of the fingers, he picked it up.
But the hand wrestled with him. ‘Tell
me your name,’ it cried, ‘and I will write it
in bright gold. Are there not deeds
to be done, children to make, poems
to be written? The world
is without meaning, awaiting

\(^{35}\) See e.g. Morris (“Present Concerns” 35-36).

\(^{36}\) For Ward, the difference between the two types of poetics here is the one between a direct and indirect enunciation of God, between His articulation in the tangible and the attempts to express the Transcendent circumlocutorily through what It is not (via negativa), between the positive proposition of metaphor and resignation from metaphor, and finally between the description of God and a search for God (97-98).

\(^{37}\) The following analysis of the poem has appeared earlier in print, with minor changes, under the title “Imagining God.”
my coming.’ But God, feeling the nails
in his side, the unnerving warmth
of the contact, fought on in
silence. This was the long war with himself
always foreseen, the question not
to be answered. What is the hand
for? The immaculate conception
preceding the delivery
of the first tool? ‘I let you go,’
he said, ‘but without blessing.
Messenger to the mixed things
of your making, tell them I am.’

The poem begins in a way which brings to mind Creation (Genesis 1:1-1:31) with its emphasis on God’s observing, recognising and admiring His own work. Indeed, this suggestion is strengthened in lines 6 and 7, where the hand’s activity is captured in the future tense (“would”). While this recourse to Genesis foregrounds the hand’s role as a metonym for man, it also attracts our attention to the poetic liberty with which the myth is evoked in the text. Surprisingly, unlike in the Bible and in spite of its status as something that was crafted – and, therefore, wanted? – by God, the creation in “The Hand” is not gladly accepted as “good” and blessed right away. Rather, the motif of the Creator’s urge to redirect His gaze is expressive of uncertainty and even “coldness,” which is “about his heart” and which thus discloses God’s emotional distance from His invention. Such distance seems to be foreshadowed in the first line, which is divided into two parts of four syllables, ascribing to each character a separate zone, as it were, and emphasising this fact with the break of a full-stop between them. On the other hand, the third line – which brings together the motifs of the hand and of God’s heart – consists of two identical feet of paeons IV, syntactically parallel and marked by alliteration of the stressed syllables, thereby forging an essential link between God’s heart and the hand.38 By implication, it seems justifiable to conjecture a certain resemblance

38 In my metrical analysis of the poem, I used the scansion system proposed by Zgorzelski simply because it enables a greater precision in identifying the nuances of the relations between meaning and the metrical organisation of the text, rather than just offering a tool for the recognition of and classification of the underlying metrical conventions. According to Zgorzelski’s method, a metrical foot must constitute a semantic entity. The scholar insists that “a foot boundary can never occur within an elementary stress-semantic structure (usually a word or a short phrase)” (“Sound and
between the protagonists, or at least an interconnection deeper and more complex than it would originally seem. The hand appears as related, however obliquely, to its creator.

New suggestions emerge as the coldness is connected with the hand’s action, appearing as the result of God feeling “as though the hand / clasped” His heart. It is hard not to imagine that “clasping” a heart would naturally mean impeding its heartbeat. In this light, “coldness” seems above all a portent of the Maker’s death, a sensation connected with His later “feeling the nails / in his side,” for while the motif of “nails” simply evokes the coolness of steel, it also unquestionably refers to the Crucifixion.\footnote{\textit{Sense} 336). As this method does not take into consideration secondary stresses, prepositions accompanied by nouns are devoid of the foot-making capacity. This allows for a greater variety of feet recognised, including the paean IV: a foot that consists of four syllables, the fourth one of which carries the stress. For more on the principles of \c{Z}gorzelski's scansion, see “Sound and Sense” and “Rytm i semantyka.”} Such a reading is also prompted by breaking the line after “as at the end,” leaving “end” in the prominent final position and divorcing the word from the context of “tunnel.” It is worth noting here that the motifs of dimming sight and “dark tunnel” themselves adhere to this interpretation – the latter alluding to popular accounts of back-from-the-dead experiences. Undoubtedly, in “clasping” we can discern an act of aggression, as in the “hand” – a hand that man has raised against God.

While generating associations with death, “tunnel” runs here in the neighbourhood of “cities” and looks forward to “engines” in the following line. This contextual positioning brings into prominence the technological aspect of that work of construction and engineering. Furthermore, due to syntactical and graphical parallelism, the “cities” and “engines” become related, sharing the role of representing modern civilisation. On taking a fresh look at the trope of the hand in this particular light, we can see that it stands in the text not just for man in general, but also for man as the producing species, as \textit{homo faber} specifically. Interestingly, the activity here associated with civilisation involves both creation (“build”) and disintegration (“raze”). Syntactical parallelism also pronounces parity between these two seemingly contradictory actions, thereby suggesting that destruction is,
paradoxically, inherent in production. The context of demolishing cities may perhaps also activate connotations of siege engines, thus pairing civilisation with war. The poem inscribes the problematics of the God-man relationship in those of technological advancement, construction, ruin, and conflict.40

Importantly, this God is driven by similar impulses both to create and to extirpate: His dissatisfaction with the hand results in the temptation to “undo the joints” (note the trace of the antithetical build-cum-pull-down conflation in the compound form of the verb, yoking the negative prefix “un” to the positive element of “do”). This is the sort of a feature that provokes critics to raise the question of God’s benevolence in Thomas’s poetry, prompting Gitzen to conclude that He is an “agent not only of good but also of evil” (174). While His urge in “The Hand” is certainly reminiscent of similar acts and wishes for annihilation in the Bible, it serves here as a vital means of instituting the similarity between the two protagonists. The verb “tempted” roots the parallel in Original Sin, and/or the temptation of Christ as the Second Adam. As Ken Smith astutely observes, “the poem is one of a number which, in different ways, implicate God in his Creation” (56-57). An extensive network of identifications seems to underlie the text, interconnecting the hand and man, hand-man and Adam, Christ and Adam, God and Christ, and thus also God and Adam, God and man, and God and the hand.

In an obvious relation to the thematics of war introduced earlier, the stimulus spurs God to engage in physical combat. The motif of wrestling, along with God’s destructive designs on his opponent’s “joints,” sends us back to Jacob’s fight at the Jabbok (Genesis 32:24-32:30). Similarly, the hand’s address to its rival (“Tell me your name”) – practically a direct citation from Genesis 32:29 – unambiguously recalls the Biblical account of the patriarch’s adventure.41 However, while the Scriptures are silent as to the purpose of this inquiry, the hand asks its adversary’s name in order to “write it / in bright gold.” This can be construed as the

40 In Laboratories of the Spirit, God’s adversary is frequently “the Machine.” This may account for Hooker’s reference to the “mythic poems” as “statements of the cause of man’s estrangement from God and from his own nature,” with that cause attributed to man’s “worship of the machine” (133). For more on this topic, see above (31 n.11).
41 “Tell me, I pray thee, thy name” (Genesis 32:29).
hand’s effort to ingratiate itself with God by flattery. By the same token, the hand seems to propose here that its sense lies in testifying to its Creator.

“[B]right gold” enunciates kingly grandeur suitable for dealing with the Lord, finding its source in the customary association of gold with the divine, with beauty, purity, and immortality, with fire and sun, and thus easily with Yahweh as well. On the other hand, gold is culturally bound with money, greed and temptation, too, evoking as it does the sinful worshipping of Mammon or the golden calf (as in Exodus 32). The two associative registers of the phrase point to the hand’s ambivalent role, defined now with the notion of “deeds” – a term encompassing both good and evil actions.

In fact, the word’s meaning depends on the sundry relations in which it functions. The hand’s previously intimated proclivity to aggression promotes a rather negative interpretation of the “deeds.” Given the earlier suggestion of God’s death, it gestures towards the Crucifixion, both in the sense of the hand’s nailing of Christ to the Cross and of the sins which necessitate Redemption. As the hand has not yet truly been brought to existence, its plea can also be understood as a reminder that the “deeds” of Creation itself need “to be done.” This reasoning is formulated in the passive voice, leaving open the question of whose deeds are under consideration. Defining their purpose as “children to make,” the following line hints at God’s fathering of the first man but also at man’s procreative capacity, and thus lends the word “deeds” the meaning of coitus. Having already inscribed God in the problematics of war and conflict – hence presumably in hate too – the speaker now does the same with love, including its very human, physical form. The semantic field of “deeds” expands even more as the hand pleads its case further, enclosing “poems” within the range of its creative performance. The mention of poetry here strikes a familiar key: it restates the defender’s earlier claim about communicating God’s name. A repeated emphasis on verbal creation further illuminates the metonym of the hand, adding a “poet” to its spectrum of meanings, and rooting the trope in the association of poetic skills with a body part that
enables writing.\footnote{Cf. Thomas’s poem “The Word” (CP 265), where God wants the hand to “[w]rite what it is to be / man.”} And, one could add, the entire passage equates poetry with the religious task of writing of the divine.

“[D]eeds / to be done” appear in the text in a locus syntactically and graphically parallel to “poems / to be written.” In a manner characteristic of this poem, the sentence comes to a stop half way through the line, leaving space for some of the ensuing syntactical unit. In this way a new element – “the world” – is inserted into the series of parallelisms beginning with “deeds” and “poems,” thereby provoking the reader to inscribe “the world” into the chain of things that need to be done. This agrees with the earlier interpretation of the hand’s utterance as an admonition prompting the Creator to finalise the Creation. Accordingly, the next line professes that the world “is without meaning, awaiting,” thus pointing to God’s indecision in the creative moment as well as evoking the freshly moulded Cosmos to be crowned with man. The completion of “awaiting” with “my coming” can be traced to Adam’s coming into the world and his naming of it. The hand’s logic assumes an arrogant air as it usurps the meaning-making of the universe. At the same time, the expostulation sparks associations with Christ, whose birth as we know is preceded by the waiting period of the Advent (from Latin \textit{adventus}, meaning “coming”). As we absorb the various suggestions inherent in the hand’s words, the impression emerges that the utterance might well belong to God himself (note its later description as God’s “war with himself”).

As we could see in this analysis, the poem harnesses a variety of means – including alliteration, metre, parallelism, and mutual correlation of motifs – to repeatedly propose an affinity between the two apparent antagonists. While this replays in the reader’s mind the Bible’s most inspiring dictum that “God created man in his own image” (Genesis 1:27), the resemblance works both ways. God’s relationship with the hand is to a great extent determined by sensual perception: He recognises the hand by \textit{looking} at it, He expresses doubt by \textit{looking} away, and His apprehension of the rival’s future actions happens through a vision (“he \textit{saw} cities . . .”) lasting until “[h]is \textit{sight} dimmed” [emphases mine]. His visual
experiences are accompanied by the sensation of coldness, or later warmth, all
connected with His “feeling the nails / in his side.” Even so brief an outline is
enough to make us realise that this God reacts according to various sensory stimuli.
As sensory reception demands a body, we are informed that He has a “heart” and
“side,” as well as being able to pick the hand up and wrestle with it. It appears that
the speaker is able to articulate the divine only to the extent that it is –
paradoxically – human. As Phillips puts it, “[t]his is a God who can be crucified,” a
God of Incarnation (80).

This bears significant consequences. Referring to man, the metonym of the
hand applies also to the man whom God became as Christ. The source of this
imagery may perhaps be found in the tradition of Manus Dei. By the same token,
it can be argued that the presentation of the Supreme Being as suffering from
human limitations and weaknesses is here an instance of looking at God through
the prism of Incarnation. Indeed, the following lines bring an obvious allusion to
the Crucifixion. While at first, in the context of fighting, we feel inclined to conceive
of the nails that God is feeling as belonging to the hand’s palm, soon a different
reading emerges, with the place of the nails’ piercing specified as “his side.”
Interestingly, two salient hallmarks of the Crucifixion are merged here: nails
usually find their place in the hands and feet, and the “side” normally plays host to
the wound from Longinus’ spear. Thus the enjambment – forcing words to operate
in two distinct semantic units, that of a line and that of a sentence – helps achieve
an increased suggestive potential, with the result that one phrase effects here as
many as three coeval suggestions (that of the hand’s offensive, that of fastening
God up on the Cross, and that of piercing His side).

The technique of putting words into several different contexts becomes even
more intensified further on in the poem. If considered on its own, the line which
brought the motif of God’s “side” locates there “the unnerving warmth.” Given the
established connection of warmth with life and blood, it seems correct to interpret
the line as alluding to the blood flowing from the spear-inflicted wound. By the

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43 See e.g. Acts 7:50, where Creation is spoken of as an act of God’s hand (“Hath not my hand made
all these things?”). See also Perry’s article “Manus Dei” for more on Thomas’s use of this metaphor.
same token, the traditional identification of Christ’s side with his heart allows us to define the sensation simply as love. In both these senses, the motif plays with the earlier “coldness” and its accompanying suggestions of indifference and death. The placing of the two antonymous impressions in two body parts traditionally identified with each other feeds into the intimations of God’s ambivalence towards the hand, of indecision as to whether He should create, and of His weighing potential life versus death, production versus destruction, good versus evil.

Paradoxically but not surprisingly, then, the warmth is as “unnerving” as the coldness. In so far as “warmth” refers to blood, “unnerving” for an omniscient God must be the awareness of approaching demise. But, as we are soon informed, “the unnerving warmth” is one of “contact”: it characterises man’s interaction with Divinity. There is the suggestion here of love as the driving force of the Maker’s attitude towards His Creation – and it is a love which can be “unnerving” to the extent that it weakens his resolution to destroy the hand, or corrupts his will not to actualise it, irrespective of the consequences. Nonetheless, the reference here is also to the physical engagement of the two contestants in their wrestling, their body heat felt through mutual touch.

Although the sentence attributes the feeling unmistakably to God, we should note that the phrase “the unnerving warmth” has a semantic potential of its own, proposing that all “warmth” – all touch and all love – is “unnerving.” To this extent, the poem generalises the emotion – in accordance with its method of conciliating the two seeming opponents – putting the Maker’s affection together with other kinds of love, including the physical one, “children to make.” This universalising is reinforced in the following line, according to which the sensation is inherent in “the contact,” but which ends abruptly before specifying the participants. In this light, all loves are “fought on in.”

As happens so often in this text, the line hangs in mid-air, encouraging the reader’s own speculations as to where such a “contact,” involving love and wrestling, can take place. The context of sexual intercourse awakens thoughts of a (marital) bed, assimilating *erotomachia*, the battle of the sexes, into the poem’s range of speculations on the Creation and its relation with the Deity. This analogy between God-man and man-woman relationships is of course a concept of great
antiquity, reaching far back to the Song of Songs, where the intimacy between Christ and the faithful is presented as that of two lovers. To borrow Sam Perry’s words, Thomas uses “the same image to express human love as he does when articulating his quest for intimations of the divine” (which, for Perry, “suggests that he regarded these two things as inextricably linked”) (“Manus Dei” 192). The poem clearly aims at an all-embracing illumination of the Creation, across all sorts of relations, including discord and love – whether it is God’s love to humanity, F/father’s love to his C/children, or a man’s love to a woman. From erotics to the Cross, everything is enveloped in “silence.”

God’s speechlessness is the corollary of His “feeling the nails / in his side, the unnerving warmth.” We are presented here with the image of the already crucified God-Christ, too weak to answer His adversary. However, other interpretations are hinted at in a larger context. For instance, the Maker’s reticence is perfectly natural in so far as the two protagonists consistently undergo identification with each other, their conflict being God’s “long war with himself,” an internal war of eternal indecision, and, in Elaine Shepherd’s words, “a battle of conscience” (114). With “wrestling,” which is supposedly a bodily activity but is presented primarily as the act of reasoning on the hand’s meaning and purpose, silence seems to signal God’s (or, the speaker’s) inability to account for the Creation. The question – “What is the hand / for?” – is “not to be answered.”

A tentative hypothesis seems to be put forward, however, in the following sentence, which combines the hand’s purpose with “the immaculate conception,” suggesting that humanity is needed for God to become incarnate. The situation becomes complicated for the Immaculate Conception is here “preceding the delivery / of the first tool.” A product and source of civilisation and a “relative” of “engines,” “tool” echoes the destruction inherent in technology. I have already pointed out the poem’s suggestion that “the hand” can be raised against God. In this light, one may feel tempted to read the motif of the “tool” as connected with “nails,” as something the hand uses to drive the nails into Christ’s palms and feet. The mythology of homo faber perhaps justifies, to a certain extent, our understanding of the tool as a hammer – “Man the Maker” was traditionally epitomised by the smith allowing the hammer’s use both for creation and for
striking enemies (Eliade 97-102). However, there’s no mention of a smith in the poem, and nothing confirms that the tool is actually a hammer. It is perhaps justifiable, then, to interpret this word as a metonymy both for the hand and for the man who operates it. A man himself, Christ could be represented through the same metonymy – granted we read the “first” as expressing importance rather than place in a chronological sequence. Or – yet another interpretative possibility exists here – the Immaculate Conception precedes human civilisation (starting with the first tool) in the sense that Christ as Logos and as a person of the Triune God existed before Creation. Also, God’s plan and intention to incarnate preceded the making of man and the subsequent invention of a tool. The poem offers a wealth of suggestions here, leaving the reader quite overwhelmed, as the enigma of the metaphor persists. This reflects the gravity of the “question,” a question which concerns the sense of Creation and which does not allow for certainty or an answer.44

The final sentence of the poem brings about a breach of the silence, signalling, we might expect, God’s reaching the verdict and indulging in Creation (in accordance with the myth of the universe as raised by His Word). God’s decision to let the hand go in the role of messenger seems to denote His acceptance of its mediating significance. Sending the hand to “mixed things of your making,” God harks back to the ambivalence of the hand as capable of both good and evil. At the same time, He also displays His perception of it as a “maker,” his words an allusion to an English translation of homo faber, with “things” becoming here the tools, engines, or similar products of civilisation. By the same token, the phrase reminds us of the hand’s indispensability for procreation (“children to make”), thereby endowing “things / of your making” with the sense of “human beings.” Interestingly, in all those meanings, the line “of your making, tell them I am” enlists even God himself as the hand’s product. To understand this, we need to return to earlier suggestions of God’s participation in Creation: to Incarnation, to the tool substituting for Christ in an earlier metaphor, or to poetry and writing as

44 Cf. Gitzen’s comments on Thomas’s “stupendous and unanswerable queries [which] leave the topic approximately where they found it” (179).
ways of materialising him in the word. Observing that God is written by man-hand, the speaker summarises, as it were, his own poetic utterance, drawing the readers’ attention to the fact that “The Hand” is one such poetic instance of “writing God.”

Unlike His Biblical counterpart in the stories of Creation and of Jacob, this God refuses to bless the hand, revealing instead his identity. While the concluding “I am” can be seen as referring to the earlier presentation of the world as “awaiting my coming,” the closing lines of “The Hand” undoubtedly echo God’s sending of Moses among the Israelites with the words “I am that I am . . . Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you” (Exodus 3:14). Superimposing this echo on Jacob’s story, the speaker confirms a collective designatum of the “hand” as a plurality which can perhaps be understood best when considering the re-naming of Jacob as Israel in Genesis 32:28, the name with the meaning of “he who strives with God” (“Jacob,” def.). Ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel, Jacob traditionally represents the spiritual part of the whole nation and, thus, all Chosen People. This is perhaps why the “wrestling” event, apparently between only two protagonists (or, otherwise, God’s internal struggle), is defined here as a “war,” connoting a large-scale conflict.

As we can see, “The Hand” focuses strongly on the figure of God. The mystery of the Absolute is considered in the light of multilateral relations: between man and God, within the Trinity, as well as between the associated abstractions, such as good and evil, love and conflict, creativity and destruction. The poem develops materially via metaphor, equivalence, parallels and parallelisms, identifications, reflections and echoes (even if sometimes antithetical) on metrical, phonetic, syntactical, thematic and graphical planes. A single word – such as the eponymous “hand” – opens ever more and more associations and links with more and more other interconnected words, phrases, echoes and traditions, all of which function in an ever-increasing number of relations. Such a manner of presenting the Deity results in a sense of complexity.

45 This suggestion of Moses as the hand’s alter ego cooperates with hand’s claim of poetry-making: Moses is also a putative author of parts of Exodus. For more on this tradition, see Wallace (75) and Pretyman (25).
What is more, a broad range of biblical allusions, from the Pentateuch to the Gospel, from Genesis, Original Sin, Exodus, to Incarnation and Crucifixion, and perhaps even Judgement Day is harnessed in the text. These all form an intricate knot, feeding and qualifying one another as they all undergo some kind of fusion – whether within a single phrase (as was the case with the motif of nails God felt in His side) or in the poem’s composition, where the speaker abandons the Biblical chronology to deal with all of the invoked myths simultaneously by inserting them in the single moment of wrestling.

A similar treatment of time applies to many poems that speak of God through this quasi-narrative technique, including “Female” (CP 227), “The Tool” (CP 271), or “The Coming”:

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows; a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

(CP 234)

In “The Coming” too, the complexities of the relation between Creation, Incarnation and Crucifixion find their reflection in the poem’s time frame. God who has only just created has not yet incarnated, while he already exists in more than one person. On the one hand, the Son’s blurry vision seems a foresight of a distant future (“Far off, / As through water”). On the other hand, he sees people “waiting /
For a vanished April / To return to its crossed / Boughs,” which suggests that the Crucifixion has already taken place, at least once. Indeed, the poem seems even to attribute a cyclic nature to Crucifixion. This can be seen in its suggestion of spring, introduced through the substitution of Christ and cross with April and tree boughs waiting to be green again. The relationship between Christ (as well as his Father) and the earth is shaped to a crucial degree through signals revolving around yearly seasons, signals which seem to impart a sense of thirst in the parched autumnal (?) land on the one hand (“fierce colour,” “light burned,” “bright,” “scorched,” “crusted”), and the “water” (with its associations with rain, tears, and thus pity, perhaps?) through which the Son watches the land, on the other hand. This entanglement of future and past, as for the Incarnation and Crucifixion, might perhaps be explained in light of the liturgy and the return of Christmas and Easter in the Christian calendar. Wherever its roots lie, the poem appears to commingle various moments in the history of the man-God relationship. Remarkably, the title itself is unspecific enough to embrace both the First and the Second Coming.

Such an all-embracing time frame is perhaps natural for God, who exists outside temporal dimension and knows all things that were, are and will be. Perhaps recourse to Boethius will provide the best summary of Thomas’s Deity as rendered in these poems: for both, it appears, “God has this complete knowledge and understanding and vision of all things . . . The power of his knowledge includes everything in an eternal present” (174-75). One of the functions of this technique lies in its not just presenting God but even His mind and point of view. The hand is not allowed its own perspective on the presented event(s), and we never learn its thoughts unless they are spelled out in a quotation. Moreover, there is no lyrical “I” introduced openly in the text, which pretends to be a story and is uttered by a quasi-“narratorial” third-person voice.

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46 Cf. Gitzen’s observation that the “mythical fable or fantasy . . . serves [Thomas’s] current needs by permitting him to escape constraints of time and space, the better to conceptualise his supernatural subject. The element of fancy allows for the portrayal of God’s characteristics and conduct in much less restrictive terms than those applied to his customary empirical pursuit of the deity” (173).

47 Similarly, the humanity in “Dialectic” (CP 342), the female figure in “The Woman” (CP 330), or the “youths and girls” and “the dark earth” in “Other” (CP 235) do not possess a perspective of their own. Some texts consist only, or to a striking degree, of God’s utterances, as happens for instance with “Making” (CP 221) or “The Island” (CP 223).
For all this, it needs to be underlined that the “depiction” of the Maker in Thomas’s “mythic poems” is consistently carried out in relation to His Creation. Although “The Hand” pretends to be a story of God’s encounter with the hand, that meeting is in fact an act of Genesis which contains the whole subsequent history of humankind and its liaison with the Godhead (roughly in recourse to the myths of the Bible), as well as constituting an attempt at figuring out “what is the hand / for.” This is to say that the poem addresses the essence and purpose of the Creation as its core element. The intricate web of entanglements shaping this poem’s presentation of God ultimately serves the purpose of conveying a personal sense of perplexity in addressing the above issue. The poem is a lyrical rendition of an existential enigma: why do we exist? what does God mean for us?

While the speaker in these poems is hidden behind the delineated world, that world is still his own creation. Therefore, an essential ambiguity arises: the seemingly divine perspective, the questions the speaker inserts in God’s mouth – this God being only a product of his own creation – actually belong to himself. Indeed, the poem’s strategy of presenting God, which consists to a crucial degree in offering a divine perspective, attracts attention to an inherent “impossibility”: the bottom line remains that the speaker cannot know what God thought or is thinking. The fictional universe of poems such as “The Hand” is based upon a subjective poetic vision: it is an application of creative imagination. This imaginative subjectivity manifests dominance of the lyrical in “The Hand” over the poem’s quasi-narrative quality. Just as Marian Maciejewski did on a different occasion, one might observe here too that this textual world is created out of the speaker’s own psychological universe and serves as a hyperbole of his mind (43). On this reading, the poem is marked by a sense of the tacit but continual presence of a hidden “lyrical ego,” even though he does not express his feelings directly and leaves the reader with the challenge of proposing what these feelings might be.

Poems like “The Hand” seem to speak of God “positively.” Although the motifs of absence, silence or emptiness do appear sometimes in these texts, they do

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48 The notion of “the lyrical” is used in this study after Emil Steiger Grundbegriffe der Poetik (13-82). See also Zgorzelski System i funkcja (41-42).
not dominate and their role is secondary. However, the poet’s approach to that “delineation” highlights the subjective and imaginative drift of the poem, drawing attention to the fundamental fact that it is an act only of imagining God, not an experience of God. As such, it is an expression of lack rather than fulfilment.

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Although the challenges intrinsic to any attempt at an “imaginative presentation” (PBRV 64) of the spiritual grappling with the elusive Supreme Being are confronted by the poet in a handful of ways, two major literary strategies can be distinguished. The first of these is contingent upon negative motifs, such as silence and absence. Obviously enough, such locution directly informs us of the frustration inherent in the speaker’s experience. Nonetheless, my investigations have also shown how the poet’s very manner of employing these motifs – their contextual positioning, as well as their nature – contributes to impart an awareness of God’s withdrawal and the speaking voice’s spiritual loneliness. Thomas’s second strategy appears to eschew a liking for negatives. Instead, in poems such as “The Hand,” he plays up to Romantic notions of poetry as well as to his own convictions about religious verse, namely that it relies crucially on lyrical imagining. A close examination of the poem’s artistic patterning brings to light an underlying sense of perplexity – triggered through an intricate network of crucial structural relations and their multi-layered complication, as well as an intensification of equivalences. The poem’s techniques lay bare an implicit counterpointing of a “positive” vocabulary with a “negative” experience.

What can be noticed in Thomas’s poetry is an impressive array of oppositions orchestrated by the poet: cooperation between antonyms put together in an equivalence, between motifs endowed with contrary suggestions in the text, between abstractions and concrete words, or between negative and positive registers.49 Such (seemingly incompatible) “partners” often bind together to form

49 It is perhaps also in this light that we could see the Herbert-like “quarrelling” quality of Thomas’s poems, frequently perceivable in the text’s opening, and suggestive of an underlying tension
an oxymoron and/or its kin, the paradox – compressed into short single phrases, or dominating the entire text (even, it might be added, a universe shared by a number of texts). Thomas’s religious poetry appears thus as fundamentally underpinned by internal tension, informing – in poetic ways – of the strain integral to the believer’s (in)experience of the Unknowable Holy.\textsuperscript{50}

The method of harnessing self-contradictory elements functions as a means of shocking the reader, bringing to the fore the text’s poeticity and its own artistic, rule-breaking creativity in attempting to express the inexpressible. \textsuperscript{51} The relationship between these contrasting words or elements in the poem’s construction often acquires the character of an opposition-cum-equivalence between perceivable and the unperceivable, between the immaterial and the material, between the spiritual and the physical. Thus, the poetic word seems to explore the enigma of two aspects of the Deity: the God who incarnated and revealed Himself to humanity as the Word, on the one hand, and the transcendent Absolute on the other. By the same token, this strategy also seems an indirect method of foregrounding the fact that any articulation of God entails an impossible exploration of the infinite within the finite means of language, enunciating the difficulty intrinsic to any such endeavour.\textsuperscript{52}

Poetry has traditionally been considered to be marked by a constant “desire” to reach beyond the limitations of human speech. It is a language of the sacred, the

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\textsuperscript{50} Similar conclusion has been reached by Herman, who observes that “[b]y using the language of paradox . . . Thomas attempts to hold two conflicting orders, the competing value systems of the infinite and the finite, in mutual tension” (719). Although referring to Thomas’s punning specifically, Damian Walford Davies also sees this poetry as replete with “dualities and tensions” and as “balancing competing claims of the physical and the spiritual, faith and doubt, absence and presence, sincerity and irony” (“Punster” 149). It seems as well that it is mostly these techniques of paradox, oxymoron and contrast that stand behind Christopher Morgan’s notion of “irony” in Thomas’s verse (124-31).

\textsuperscript{51} For Pseudo-Dionysius, as Eco notes, the oxymoron is useful in talking about the Unknowable “precisely to underline its ineffability” (Kant 32).

\textsuperscript{52} According to several critics, such as Ward, the poet is unsuccessful in his pursuits, as he “appears to be striving for articulation of God” (104; see also 110 and passim). However, I find it hard to accept such propositions, as they need to be confronted with the basic notion of lyrical poetry as being above all about the expression of personal experience (irrespective of what the poet himself might have maintained his purpose was). And in rendering that experience – whether positive, negative or ambivalent – the poet seems quite successful, as I hope to have shown.
most appropriate way to speak of the Ultimate Reality.\textsuperscript{53} The Christian tradition even insists that poetry results from divine intervention through the Holy Spirit. However, in spite of their pretence to the contrary, both Thomas’s strategies manifest themselves as “negative” at their roots, in the sense that ultimately neither of them provides a scene for communing with the Supreme Being. Strikingly, Deity as considered by the poet is rather in the persons of God and of the incarnated/crucified Christ, but not as the full Trinity. This is to say, God, for Thomas, does not reveal Himself even in the Book, not even as the Word of the Scriptures.\textsuperscript{54} There is no divine inspiration ensuring revelatory experience in writing: Thomas’s technique points to impossibility rather than possibility for the Word to transpire through the written word.

In \textit{Poetic Imagination: An Anglican Spiritual Tradition}, L. William Countryman stresses that Anglican religious poetry can and frequently does speak of the spiritual life “in terms of dialectic of absence and presence” (62). In his understanding of this dialectic, Countryman seems to take for an implicit, underwriting model internal confrontations of the kind that typifies George Herbert’s verse, where the divine withdrawal is only the beginning of experiential and emotional fluctuations which will in the end retrieve a relationship with the Holy (62-65).\textsuperscript{55} On his view, even if they cannot be called simply and precisely mystical, both Anglican spirituality and the poetry expressing it have at their core a mystical element, often accompanied with imagery suggestive of ecstasy (69).

\textsuperscript{53} We have already seen Thomas displaying that view in his interview with Ormond (53-54), his introduction to \textit{The Penguin Book of Religious Verse} (64-65), or in “A Frame for Poetry” (90). This idea has also inspired the thought of the Romantics, of Heidegger, Rousset, or Derrida. Similarly, Denys Turner maintains that anything we can say of God is unavoidably metaphorical (39). Cf. Eco (\textit{Kant} 31-32, 56).

\textsuperscript{54} As John Donne holds, the Anglican church is distinguished by the fact that "we make the Word the onely rule of our faith" (qtd. in Potkay 59). Cf.: “The Anglican poetic tradition has certain characteristic elements, including a high (but distinctive) regard for scripture . . . The peculiar place of \textit{scripture} owes much to the way in which the English Reformers made the reading of it a central activity of faith and created a specifically Anglican context for it in the Daily Office, which placed the reading of scripture in the primary context of common prayer rather than that of theological reflection or polemic” (Countryman 37-38).

\textsuperscript{55} According to Countryman, Anglican spiritual experience is “an experience of the Holy, of God, that is both available and unavailable, both known and unknown, both intimate and distant, withheld at times and given at times. The transition from absence to presence, which I shall refer to here as ‘the discovery of grace,’ is the key experience around which Anglican poetic spirituality shapes itself” (61).
Moreover, Countryman’s discussion of Anglican verse seems implicitly to attribute to it a devotional character. In this light, Thomas – rightly counted by Hooker as “among the least devotional of Christian poets” (132) – manifests himself as not merely growing out of but also at the same time, let’s say “outgrowing,” the conventions of British religious poetry.

On the other hand, Thomasian negativity does not lead to agnosticism or atheism: on the contrary, it belongs to a deeply religious sentiment. In his verse, after all, “[s]ilence is the message” (“Questions” LP 193): while it bespeaks His missing from the sphere of the speaker’s direct experience, it does not negate God but is read as communicating Him. Admittedly, silence hampers or prohibits cognition, but it does not necessarily undermine existence. In this sense, it is hard to agree with Tim McKenzie’s contention, in Vocation in the Poetry of the Priest-Poets George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and R.S. Thomas, that the last of these crowns a chain of poets who “struggled against unbelief” (4).56

As Thomas’s faith does not find its source in direct communing with the Deity, his religious verse is marked by a penchant for abstractions at a cost to sensory character. The God of these intellectual investigations is unavailable to perception and therefore has to be deduced from some phenomena that can be interpreted as signs (sometimes perversely) of His existence.57 Or, alternatively, He is known a priori, and assumed as an indubitable premise.58 In other words, their presentation of spiritual experience is led and guided by thought: their poetic tends

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56 Cf. Barry Morgan: “Because of the way R.S. Thomas has written about God’s absence, some critics have questioned whether he had any faith at all. They maintain that the tortuous nature of some of the poems indicates that Thomas had really ceased to believe in God in any meaningful way” (29). Herman falls back on the idiom such as “the seeming absence of a creed” or “a crisis of belief” (710–11).
57 A discursive character of these poems seems to be emphasised by the numerous motifs referring to reflection – as we observed, for instance, in “Via Negativa” (CP 220) or as is manifest in the abundance of “I think” that characterises this oeuvre, including “Travellers” (CP 308), “Covenant” (CP 375), or “Too Late” (F 11).
58 Thus, “[t]he darkness implies” God’s presence (emphasis mine) (“Shadows” CP 343), “We must not despair. / The invisible is yet susceptible / of being inferred” (“Nuance” NTF 32), and “from the belief that nothing is nothing / it follows that there must be something” (“Mass for Hard Times” MHT 2).
to be one of reflection. In this respect, Thomas’s poetry reveals itself as closer to the meditative than to the contemplative tradition, with which it is often linked.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{59} For more on Thomas’s poetry as contemplative, see e.g. Conran, Harries, and Phillips (xv-xviii). In the current study, I distinguish between the meditative and contemplative strands in Thomas’s poetics as rendering “reflective process, so essential in the meditative poem” (Sadoff 19) and a non-discursive stance respectively. In my understanding of this distinction, I roughly follow the propositions outlined by Sadoff, Martz, and Clements.
Chapter 2: On Nature

John Ackerman once pointed out that “[t]he world of R.S. Thomas’s poetry clearly emerges as that of the poet and priest in conversation with himself on the subjects of man, God, and nature” (“Man and Nature” 15). Granted that significance, it is surprising to see that plants, winged and four-legged creatures, along with their green home in Thomas’s verse, are only fragmentarily illumined by academic scrutiny. Small part of the field that does get covered is mostly confined to the poet’s “nature mysticism” and to the religious tinge that colours his writing, as critics often endorse Barry Morgan’s opinion that “for R.S. Thomas it was through the natural world that God was chiefly revealed” (33). This is the approach Morgan shares with Elaine Shepherd and Barry Sloan. Christopher Morgan, in regard to this matter, also focuses on “Thomas’s theology of nature” (52). For him, “[a] precise understanding of just what Thomas means by the term ‘nature mystic’ simply becomes a “prerequisite not only to an understanding of his particular outlook but also to an understanding of his particular positions on major topics such as science . . . and God” (52). Morgan’s study leaves conspicuously untouched the matter of the poetic expression of such “mystical” experience in verse, by the author of “Moorland” or “Swifts.”

Another widespread critical trend alerts us to the situation of Thomas’s poetic landscapes in Wales. Within this trend, critics often canvass the intricacies of national identity adhering to the man tagged a Welsh bard writing in English, or attend to this poetry’s intersections with social and political problematics.

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1 The term “nature mysticism” derives from Thomas’s confession of his being a “nature mystic” in “Priest and Poet” (Ormond 51), and has been subsequently adopted by critics such as Christopher Morgan (53 and passim).

2 See Sloan (38-40). Although, for Shepherd, “[t]he various experiments which Thomas made in voicing and the constantly shifting perspectives on nature, God and religious language operate both to affirm and to deny the adequacy of any one of them as a representation of God” (75), the natural “landscape” in his poetry is examined within the religious frame, as an “image” – whether positive or negative – of the Deity. See the third chapter (“Landscape as Image”) of her study Images of God (49-88).

3 See e.g. Allan Massie’s calling Thomas “this strange Welsh bard, who wrote beautifully in the language of the England he so deeply resented,” in an article for The Telegraph from 16 March 2013.
Morris’s paper “The Topography of R.S. Thomas” is as good an example as any, in concentrating on the thematic ties between the places where Thomas lived and his verse. “R.S. Thomas: The Landscape of Near-Despair” by Robert Nisbet, in turn, sees the poet’s bleak settings as designed to voice his social stance: that is, his opposition to the nostalgic clichés of Cymru popular amongst the emergent meritocracy. Finally, in “For Wales, See Landscape,” M. Wynn Thomas addresses the topic of the poet’s internal sense of exile from his motherland, approaching it from a postcolonial perspective (37-65). By way of comparing R.S. Thomas’s vision with the exoticising paintings of his wife Elsi, an outsider “resident” in Wales, he proposes to consider the poet as a “resident native,” a local who persistently feels foreign. As demonstrated by the above essays, a cornerstone of such essentially biographical and/or politically-oriented readings lies in evaluations of the images of the country and of its inhabitants as idealising or rebelling against idealisation, rejecting or attempting a true representation. These concerns also form the linchpin of “Some Versions of Contemporary Pastoral?” by Terry Gifford, who binds the conflicting critical threads, weaving the notion of a “reluctant pastoral,” and therewith striving to embrace the tensions inherent in Thomas’s presentation of the farmer’s habitat.

In this milieu, Ackerman’s article “Man and Nature in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas” emerges as important in that it moves away from the mainstream to comment on Thomas’s natural world with respect to its “influence on man and his inner life” (15). Ackerman’s investigations reformulate within this framework the question of nature’s ambivalence, which appears as beautiful and worthy of admiration irrespective of whether it be “benevolent, indifferent, or hostile” (19). In “Nature and Some Anglo-Welsh Poets,” Marie-Therese Castay also has illuminating points to make about a universal – alongside regional – significance of Anglo-Welsh portrayals of natural phenomena. Employing Bachelard’s conception of four types of creators of verse, she throws a spotlight on the four elemental forces (air, earth, water and fire) in the writings of R.S. Thomas, his namesake Dylan Thomas, and Vernon Watkins. In her analysis, the early Thomas emerges predominantly as a land-bound poet, fascinated with the “soil out of which man is fashioned” (107), later to turn his preoccupation mostly towards wind, which “fits in with the picture
of a realistic portrayal of the Welsh countryside [as well as visualising] the breath of God” (109).

A perception of the universe in spiritual categories is perhaps unavoidable in any priest-poet, as is poetic landscape’s rootedness in the familiar corners of the author’s home country. While not ignoring these issues, the present study, however, undertakes its journey across Thomas’s natural world from a different starting point. Rather than images *per se*, I examine the manner through which they have been created. Furthermore, I attend to nature’s role in the construction of a given text, ultimately moving towards more generalised conclusions as to the kinds of poetics involved. Such an approach allows us to see the stylistic facets of the verse not merely as symptoms of the author’s internal conflicts but rather as artistic achievement. In this way, I also intend to stretch the span of scholarly inquiry to enable a richer understanding of the ways in which “[t]he force that through the green fuse drives the flower,” to borrow Dylan Thomas’s words, appears in this poetry (5). The present study is the only one to date which launches into a cross-country trip, so to speak, through this less than fully charted terrain.

With the view to enabling a broader exploration, the present chapter is divided into three major sections, depending on the role which nature fulfils in a given text. More specifically, the first part engages with the relevant motifs, irrespective of a poem’s subject matter. The second addresses the issue of the setting. I will thus begin more generally, in the final part to concentrate more strictly on nature poems by R.S. Thomas. By these, I mean poems in which flora, fauna and the green realm constitute the main theme, such as “The View from the Window” (CP 81), “The White Tiger” (CP 358), “Moorland” (CP 513), “Swifts” (CP 154), or “Sea-Watching” (CP 306).

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When we turn to Thomas’s dealings with the physical world, we find that it is most often introduced in the guise of a motif, and in this form, it can appear also
in his poetic confrontations with *Deus absconditus*.4 “Retired” (MHT 23), for instance, features a speaker looking for God in the “night sky,” the stars, in the music of the grasses’ “orchestra,” and in the smell of a “lily-flower”:

> Not to worry myself anymore  
> if I am out of step, fallen behind.

> Here I can watch the night sky,  
> listen to how one grass blade  
> grates on another as member  
> of a disdained orchestra.

> There are no meetings to attend  
> now other than those nocturnal  
> gatherings, whose luminaries  
> fell silent millennia ago.

> No longer guilty of wasting  
> my time, I take my place  
> by a lily-flower, believing  
> with Blake that when God comes  
> he comes sometimes by way  
> of the nostril.

The works of nature listed in the text are shaped not by descriptive but by abstract poetics that are characteristic of Thomas’s spiritual questing in verse. While pretending to possess physical palpability, they do not contribute towards a description of a particular scene. Their selection actually seems to be governed by their effective linking with “watch,” “listen” and “nostril”: these references to the three senses of sight, hearing and smell betray that the sky and the plants beneath it shouldn’t be treated too literally, but rather as representatives of the natural world in general.

Similarly, the stars possess double meaning here. The term “luminary” is usually applied to a celestial body that gives light – this basic sense is underscored

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4 On the use of the term “motif” here, see Introduction (20 n.34).
in the poem through the epithet “nocturnal” and through the direct statement “Here I can watch the night sky.” However, in the context of “meetings to attend,” “luminaries” also clearly refers to persons of prominence. The twofold semantics indicates an inherent contrast between the days before retirement – busy and duty-filled, full of “meetings” and “gatherings” – and the present time, offering the possibility for the speaker to devote his attention to organic life. The epithet “silent” thus carries an implied suggestion of talkativeness associated with interactions with other people.

On the other hand, the motif of stars’ soundlessness – in a similarly perverse way – awakens the allusive ghost of the old Pythagorean idea of the music of the spheres. Although this conception has spawned a variety of its own reincarnations across history, its common Christian variant propounds the notion of the universe as formed and moving according to the proportions of musical harmony arranged by Christ the Logos.⁵ This *musica universalis* is thus viewed as one of the ways through which the Maker exposes Himself in His Work.⁶ The poet has, however, decided that the cosmic “orchestra” is to be “disdained” – hence, the verb “grate” haunts the text with intimations of unmelodious cacophony. In “disdained,” the speaker implies that God-the conductor is unsatisfied with his Creation, as well as indirectly confessing his own feeling of abandonment.⁷ Making out that the world does not exhibit the caring presence of its Founder, the poem resigns from the tradition of taking solace from the Argument from Design – a tradition represented, for instance, by George Herbert’s “Providence” (113), “Praise III” (154), or *The Church Militant* (186-93). This is to say, nature motifs also play a part in an appraisal of a certain view and conception of the universe.

This happens also in “Circles” and “Rough,” albeit in slightly different ways:

God looked at the eagle that looked at
the wolf that watched the jack-rabbit

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⁵ Some useful reference resources on this topic include articles by Reilly and Kinkeldey, both titled “The Music of the Spheres.”
⁶ Likewise, the universe of “Senior” (CP 387) is depicted in similar terms of (not) relaying God: “there is only / the silence,” the stars’ radiation conveys only “a cold message.” The motif of the cosmic communication features also in “Too Late?” (F 11).
⁷ See also, for comparison, Thomas’s poem “The Conductor” (CP 100).
cropping the grass, green and curling
as God’s beard. He stepped back;
it was perfect, a self-regulating machine
of blood and faeces.

(“Rough” CP 286)

A man threw some brushings away.
A wren found them and built in them.
A rat found the young when they were hatched.
The rat came, stealing the man’s bread,
And lies now, a cupboard for maggots.

It is man makes the first move and the last.
He throws things away and they return to him.

(“Circles” CP 245)

The opening lines of “Rough” flow to the rhythm of a “machine,” the beat of repetition paired with enumeration so that the sequence of words captures the essence of the food chain (a cycle of “blood and faeces”). The eagle, the wolf, the jack-rabbit and the grass inhabit that ecosystem as representatives of a certain hierarchy of “predators” – “cropping the grass,” the rabbit is placed in a similar role of a killer-for-survival – which seems here to descend in perspective from the skies to the small scale of close-to-the-earth. God is inscribed in both the beginning and the end, like alpha and omega. The poem is very much like “Circles,” the latter also relying on parallelisms in its rendition of a pattern. Both texts, moreover, seem indebted to the rhetorical strategy of exemplum: each synecdochically functioning animal constitutes an example in a “description” which, in turn, provides an illustration for certain laws of the universe. Thomas’s technique here constitutes a vital factor in conveying a fascination with the natural order of things, one which embraces processes. This can also be perceived in his constant thematic “concern with cyclical motions, the sea tides, the earth rotation, the bird migrations, and the round of the seasons” (Castay 108).

8 I refer here to exemplum as a rhetorical technique devised in ancient Greece, rather than to the convention employed in sermons and literary texts of the Middle Ages, even though the two are related. What I mean to say here is that the speaker falls back on synecdochic examples as a support in delivering his reasoning. Nonetheless, one could mention that the religious exempla frequently drew from science and the natural world to provide representation of a given moral principle. For more on this subject, see Teresa Szostek Exemplum.
Where conceptions of the universe are grounded in science, philosophy or systems of belief, a related strategy is to inscribe nature motifs in references and allusions to diverse theories and ideas, cultural traditions, and even other (literary or scholarly) texts – as was the case with the motif of stars’ silence or the reference to Blake’s flower in “Retired.”

Likewise, “Flowers” (CP 390) engages with Plato’s metaphysics (or, with Neo-Platonism more generally, since there is no direct mention of the author of the cave allegory himself):

But behind the flower
is that other flower
which is ageless, the idea
of the flower

The moon in Thomas’s verse, to give another example, often becomes tied up with Yeats’s philosophy, with pagan mythologies, and with Christian religious symbolism. “The Moon in Lleyn” (CP 282) illustrates this tendency quite clearly:

The last quarter of the moon
of Jesus gives way
to the dark; the serpent
digests the egg. Here
on my knees in this stone
church, that is full only
of the silent congregation
of shadows and the sea’s
sound, it is easy to believe
Yeats was right.

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... Even as this moon
making its way through the earth’s
cumbersome shadow, prayer, too,
has its phases.

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9 For more on Thomas’s relationship with science, see Introduction (3 n.2) and Chapter 1 (31 n.11). Thomas’s “believing with Blake,” as he says in “Retired,” that the Deity could be sought for in a flower, seems to have originated in “Auguries of Innocence” (589-92).

10 For a useful overview of religious significance attached to that heavenly body, and of its perception – originating in the moon’s monthly cycle – as reflecting “[t]he divine drama of dying and rising Christ,” see Hugo Rahner Greek Myths (168). Compare also Thomas’s “Nativity” (CP 508) or “Planetary” (R 19).
As suggested by the metaphor “the moon of Jesus,” the motif of the egg-eating snake, and the direct mention of Yeats (and moon’s “phases”), the poem makes use of all the three above repertories. If the moon stands for Christ, the reptile can perhaps also be taken for the devil, the evil creature that tempted the first humans so successfully in Eden. The egg-eating serpent, however, seems additionally to blend with pagan cosmogonies (such as the one of the Orphic egg) and myths, in which it is said to temporarily swallow a luminary orb (sun or its nightly counterpart) during eclipses.11

This poem is one of many which foreground erudition and scholarship in their presentation of the natural world. Similar effect is also produced in poems speaking of the physical world through vocabulary such as “pulsars” (“Too Late?” F 11), “electron” (“Could Be” MHT 54), “space-time” (“Blackbird” UP 160), “microbes” (“Hebrews 1229” CP 484), or “the black whole . . . universe drawing / away from us at the speed of light” (“Tell Us” MHT 46), a terminology grounded in the discoveries of modern physics or biology. It seems to me that the import of Thomas’s recourse to scientific imagery lies certainly but not solely in conveying the poet’s personal distrust of technology, for instance as “breaking [the] intimacy between humanity and nature” (Christopher Morgan 111). To accept such a limiting view would be to ignore the fact that such diction can also be looked at together with and as akin to – if not in underlying causes then in outcome – the poet’s engagement with the grand topic of the workings of the universe. It seems to me that its role lies also in intellectualising the “vision,” so to speak. This is to say, the science lexicon informs us that it is the speaker’s knowledge, rather than direct observation, which governs his utterance. Indeed, the microscopic realm of electrons and quarks, or the macro-scale cosmos of galaxies are hardly phenomena which can simply be looked at. My analysis of Thomas’s employment of motifs relating to natural world points out their synecdochic and conceptual character. The poet’s strategies emerge thus as moulded by poetics of rumination: nature motifs here are called forth by the poet in the service of “argument” and reflection.

11 For more on this role that the serpent plays in ancient Egypt and other cultures, see for instance, Biren Bonnerjea “Eclipses” (65) and Joanne Conman “Cosmology.”
What we discover in poems like “Retired,” “Flowers,” “Rough” or “Circles” is the elimination of traits of individuality in the depiction of the physical world. If observation appears – as might perhaps be the case with “Circles” or “Flowers” – it serves as a “pre-text,” a text-preceding stimulus not for an ensuing description but for thought.

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In “R.S. Thomas: ‘Narrow but Saved,’” Edward Picot makes a case for calling Thomas a “primitivist” with a nationalist and religious bent who “blames the shortcomings of modern urban existence on the rational, analytical and individualistic way of thought” (105). While this is a sin which constitutes for the poet a contemporary version of the Fall – the scholar argues – unspoilt Welsh scenery accordingly provides the saving blessing of a prelapsarian Edenic state. This distaste for the city, which marks Thomas’s worldview, finds its correspondence in a certain stylistic property of his verse. Hardly a poet of the urban environment, Thomas, as we might expect, not only confers the role of a single motif on the organic element, but also makes it a crucial constituent of his settings, as he does in “Islandmen” (CP 244), “Out of the Hills” (CP 1), “Sailors’ Hospital” (CP 193), or “Hafod Lom” (CP 156). What strikes the reader of Thomas’s verse is the degree to which his settings are persistently similar, featuring the moors, the sea, or farming fields and pastures in the hills – repeatedly, these are all damp and soggy with rain, saddened by the clouds, and lashed by the merciless wind. Again and again, that land is covered with lichen, moss, or grass, and at times roamed by animals of domestic stock: the sheep, ewe, wether, cow or pig. Frequently, a bird “re-leaf[s]” a tree (“A Thicket in Lleyn” CP 511), hovers over the otherwise empty heath, or strikes a note of sadness or comfort.12 Clearly enough, these motifs have a descriptive function: their selection roots the presented world model in Snowdonia, the Welsh coast, and rural northern Wales.

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12 Thomas’s fascination with birds has been surveyed in greater detail by Jarman, John Davies, and William V. Davis (“Lame Feet” 166-73).
What is curious, however, is the pervasive presentation of that environment as the domain of the four elements, a trait which becomes conspicuous owing to metaphor, which identifies all elements with one another. A case in point is the very sameness of earth, water and air in one metaphor of “churning the crude earth / To a stiff sea of clouds” in “A Peasant” (CP 4). Typical in this oeuvre is the rapport established between the earth (including grass, moor, or field) and water, like in “moor’s deep tides” (“Green Categories” CP 77) or “tacking against the fields’ / Uneasy tides” (“The Labourer” CP 39). Finally, “the wave of wind, / That breaks continually on the brittle ear” (“Peasant Greeting” CP 12), “the wind’s stream” (“No Answer” UP 37), or “The sea folded too rough / On the shingle” (“Sir Gelli Meurig” CP 187) result in semantic overlapping between air and sea in the poems’ supercodes. One consequence of such technique seems to be a questioning of the reliability of observations, betraying a weaker footing in description than might have been expected at first. One might for instance ask about the validity of the sea motifs in depictions of farmland in poems supposedly set in Manafon, a village as far from the coast as the border with England. The countryside seems to be conceived of metaphorically. Devising his world models by way of metaphor, the text draws the reader’s attention away from the location itself towards its own poetic quality, bespeaking an artistic aim rather than simply being a symptom of the author’s national identity crisis as a “resident native,” as M. Wynn Thomas would have it (“For Wales”).

Furthermore, Thomas’s technique undermines the specificity of each element, to foreground their common essential character as elemental force. The effect is that of underlining the vitality and might of a fierce, unrestrained, primal nature – just as the peculiarities of the depicted locales tend to emphasise their

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13 For more on the term “supercode” as used in this thesis, see above (“Introduction” 16).
14 Morris does not remain indifferent to such discrepancies, and he maintains that Thomas’s Manafon poems have their “origin not in Manafon, but in the hills and moorland of Cefn Coch above Adfa, more than ten miles to the West” (“Topography” 50) as Manafon itself “contrary to what one might expect in reading Mr. Thomas’s first four volumes of verse . . . is not an exposed hill village, surrounded by moors and mountains, and peopled by peasants more isolated than the sheep they tend” (48). The critic further elaborates that the village “lies very snugly in a small river valley, the fields are hedged, the pasture reasonably rich, and the hills which lie around it are no more than a few hundred feet high” (48).
wildness. The fields and farmlands are repeatedly depopulated and “[t]he houses stand empty,” as “The Welsh Hill Country” (CP 22) informs us. In this last poem, by insistently spelling out the distance between the described corner of the rural countryside and the addressee, the anaphora “[t]oo far for you to see” (including the final variant “[t]oo far, too far to see”) emphasises the remoteness of the area, where “fields are reverting to the bare moor.”15 Similarly, the abode of Hafod Lom is of interest for the speaker precisely because it is no longer subordinate to the ruling hand of man – the charm seems to be exactly in the reverse, in the rule of organic forces:

Hafod Lom, the poor holding:
I have become used to its
Beauty, the ornamentation
Of its bare walls with grey
And gold lichen; to its chimney
Tasselled with grasses. Outside
In the ruined orchard the leaves
Are richer than fruit; music
From a solitary robin plays
Like a small fountain. It is hard
To recall here the drabness
Of past lives, who wore their days
Raggedly, seeking meaning
In a lean rib. Imagine a child’s
Upbringing, who took for truth
That rough acreage the rain
Fenced; who sowed his dreams
Hopelessly in the wind blowing
Off bare plates. Yet often from such
Those men came, who, through windows
In the thick mist peering down
To the low country, saw learning
Ready to reap. Their long gnawing
At life’s crust gave them teeth
And a strong jaw and perseverance
For the mastication of the fact.

(CP 156)

15 As M. Wynn Thomas rightly argues, this tendency can be at least partly explained by a Neo-Romantic exoticising of Wales by the poet (“For Wales”).
In “Hafod Lom,” flora and fauna are the means by which the poet conjures up a sense of an abandoned ruin, overgrown with grass and lichen, with only a “solitary” bird to liven up the orchard. The walls no longer flaunt any pictures but remain “bare” and “grey,” and the image of the “poor holding” is fashioned largely by way of pejorative diction. Yet this is not the last impression given by the text because this negative idiom is interwoven with a positive lexis of admiration. Terms such as “beauty,” “richer,” “tasselled,” “gold,” and “ornamentation” are all expressive of the speaker’s personal attitude towards the view, in what might be called a contemporary revisiting of the subjective picturesque. The description is thus organised according to contrast – a juxtaposition of two mutually incompatible, quarrelling sets of terms. As the dilapidated farmstead provokes the speaker to think of “the drabness / Of past lives,” “Hafod Lom” recalls the Romantic proclivity to be enticed by “[t]he physical state of ruins . . . to contemplate on the lives of the people who are long gone” (Handa 1). At the same time, the manner of description bespeaks a paradoxical reversal of values whereby the dwelling is more attractive in its decay than when it was flourishing. The ground for this inversion is the superiority of nature’s beauty over (the “drabness” of) human life.

“Hafod Lom” is fairly typical of Thomas’s oeuvre in that it positions the green realm in relation to man. Set against the background of Thomas’s natural world, the human being appears a fragile, less significant figure. This overturning of the power hierarchies is also sometimes magnified through personification, as in “the face / Of the grim heavens” (“No Answer” UP 37), or in “Depopulation of the Hills” (CP 28):

Leave it, leave it – the hole under the door
Was a mouth through which the rough wind spoke
Ever more sharply; the dank hand
Of age was busy on the walls
Scrawling in blurred characters
Messages of hate and fear.

Leave it, leave it – the cold rain began
At summer end – there is no road
Over the bog, and winter comes
With mud above the axletree.
Leave it, leave it – the rain dripped
Day and night from the patched roof
Sagging beneath its load of sky.

Did the earth help them, time befriend
These last survivors? Did the spring grass
Heal winter’s ravages? The grass
Wrecked them in its draughty tides
Grew from the chimney-stack like smoke,
Burned its way through the weak timbers.
That was nature’s jest, the sides
Of the old hulk cracked, but not with mirth.

Even as early as in the poem’s first lines, the reader’s attention is drawn to the poetic techniques shaping the semantic field of the word “depopulation.” Nature’s dominance is expressed there by means of a shift in the sentence subject: those actions which were typical of man became now the domain of the elements. The function of speech, for instance, has been appropriated by the wind as lips are replaced by a gap between the floor and the door. The activity of time and dampness supersedes that of the human hand, with writing turning into an accretion of signs of those two organic phenomena. It is not man but winter that “comes” and has taken possession of the road. Nature has her own intentions, and she is capable of making jokes. All enterprise is hers: men are mentioned in the poem only briefly as “survivors,” besides constituting the probable addressee of each stanza’s apostrophe. This transposition of functions is achieved exactly by means of personification underlying the phrases “wind spoke,” “hand / Of age was busy . . . / Scrawling,” “Did the earth help,” “Did the . . . grass heal,” or “nature’s jest.”

The relationship between man and the ferocious environs in “Depopulation of the Hills” has, in part, the make-up of an act of communication, specifically of a joke and a message written on the wall. Nature’s sense of humour, however, is rather cruel, and the communiqué is tethered to feelings of “hate and fear,” reminiscent of the biblical warning of Mane, tekel, u-pharsim, a forecast of

apocalyptic destruction from the Book of Daniel (5:1-5:31). This is connected with another vital facet of the man-nature equation in the poem, namely its character of a struggle, of man’s fight for survival. As if against the apostrophes beginning the first three stanzas, the “depopulation” takes place not because of the inhabitants’ departure from the inhospitable hills (after all, “there is no road / Over the bog”), but by means of their undoing when they are “wrecked” by natural forces. As the text awakens the ghosts of the Biblical Flood, the behaviour of the elements assumes the characteristics of a cataclysm.

As I have shown, Thomas’s poetic strategies in dealing with the natural world rely strongly on imagery of the elements, metaphor, and personification to present nature as an untamed wild power. From our overview so far a conclusion can also be drawn as to another of its recurrent characteristics, complementing and coterminous with its beauty, namely its aggressive destructiveness, or at least cruel indifference in meeting with the human being. In this sense, Thomas’s is certainly an un-Romantic “vision” – there is no joyful dancing with the daffodils in the texts examined above. The overall impression of a “bleak background” (“The Welsh Hill Country” CP 22) and a grim world is born, spawned by the plurality of epithets bearing pejorative associations. These include “gaunt” (“The Tree” CP 33, “Evans” CP 74, “Iago Prytherch” CP 87, or “The Belfry” CP 168), “harsh” (“Peasant Greeting” CP 12, “Ire” SF 40), “hard” (“Death of a Peasant” CP 34, “Too Late” CP 108, “He” CP 224), “rough” (“The Airy Tomb” CP 17, “Depopulation of the Hills” CP 28, “The Hill Farmer Speaks” CP 31), “black” (“To the Farmer” CP 97, “The Country Clergy” CP 82, “Guests” NTF 73), or “grey” (“The Country Clergy” CP 82, “The Gap in the Hedge” CP 29, “A Welsh Testament” CP 117), to name just a few.17 In “A Labourer” (CP 2), in turn, the rutabaga roots the protagonist is to wrench out of the soil are “reluctant,” he “wades in the . . . earth / Hour by hour” (as if in mud) triggering a picture of effort and de-braining humdrum routine, and there’s only one colour – brown (not very bright or cheerful):

17 Hence the critical discourse on Thomas heaps descriptions of his poetry as “a drama of a bleak universe” (Pikoulis and Roberts), a “reluctant pastoral” of “wet, bleak hills” (Gifford “Some Versions” 47, 45) and of “stark natural settings, and imagery of bones and bare trees [that] delineate the austere side of his vision” (Hooker 132).
Who can tell his years, for the winds have stretched
So tight the skin on the bare racks of bone
That his face is smooth, inscrutable as stone?
And when he wades in the brown bilge of earth
Hour by hour, or stoops to pull
The reluctant swedes, who can read the look
In the colourless eyes, as his back comes straight
Like an old tree lightened of the snow’s weight?
Is there love there, or hope, or any thought
For the frail form broken beneath his tread,
And the sweet pregnancy that yields his bread?

There’s also a suggestion of the hero’s being hunched or bent as if under a heavy load: the simile “his back comes straight / Like an old tree lightened of the snow’s weight” perversely prompts us to imagine the figure of the farmer as usually bent, as if under a burden.

The poem is an important one in that it constitutes a good example of another strategy, complementing the one which personified the physical world: significantly, here, virtually all information concerning the countryman is provided with reference to the nature (the earth, the winds, the stone, the tree and the snow) that surrounds him and seems even to define him. This is not a unique incident:

Men of bone, wrenched from the bitter moorland,
Who have not yet shaken the moss from your savage sculls,
Or prayed the peat from your eyes,
Did you detect like an ewe or an ailing wether,

But I know, as I listen, that your speech has in it
The source of all poetry, clear as a rill
Bubbling from your lips

This is from “A Priest to His People,” a poem from The Stones of the Field (29). Amongst similar texts, “A Peasant” (CP 4) is perhaps particularly worth mentioning, for its metaphor “his spittled mirth / Rarer than the sun that cracks the cheeks / Of the gaunt sky” establishes affinity between the protagonist’s feelings of joy and the sun, as well as effecting the complementary equivalence between his cheeks and the sky (hence, the epithet “gaunt” refers to both the labourer’s and the sky’s mood). Here, then, nature shapes and characterises the
protagonist both externally and internally, as it were: the equivalence not only describes his looks but also his mood, thoughts or soul.18

Pertinent to our concern with the complexities of nature’s role in relationship with man is also “Green Categories” (CP 77), the first part of which tells us that Kant’s subjective categories of time and space do not apply to any description of Prytherch’s mind, a mind untouched by intellectual or imaginative efforts, and “rooted” in the physical matter of “flesh, / Stone, tree and flower”:

You never heard of Kant, did you, Prytherch?
A strange man! What would he have said
Of your life here, free from the remote
War of antinomies; free also
From mind’s uncertainty faced with a world
Of its own making?
Here all is sure;
Things exist rooted in the flesh,
Stone, tree and flower. Even while you sleep
In your low room, the dark moor exerts
Its pressure on the timbers. Space and time
Are not the mathematics that your will
Imposes, but a green calendar
Your heart observes; how else could you
Find your way home or know when to die
With the slow patience of the men who raised
This landmark in the moor’s deep tides?

His logic would have failed; your mind, too,
Exposed suddenly to the cold wind
Of genius, faltered. Yet at night together
In your small garden, fenced from the wild moor’s
Constant aggression, you could have been at one,
Sharing your faith over a star’s blue fire.

In Prytherch’s case, cognitive categories are identical with natural processes, a “green calendar [his] heart observes.” The last lines of the poem, however, point to an element connecting Prytherch and Kant, by alluding to the philosopher’s famous saying, from The Critique of Practical Reason, that “[t]wo things fill the

18 Cf. also e.g. “your soul made strong / By the earth’s incense, the wind’s song” (“Absolution” CP 92), or “his soul’s hardness, traditional discipline / Of flint and frost thawing in ludicrous showers / Of maudlin laughter” (“Out of the Hills” CP 1).
mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within” (164). The text seems thus to introduce the problem of faith, of reflection, and of marvelling at the natural beauty as an element that differentiates Prytherch from the physical world. In this, it is akin, for instance, to the already discussed “A Labourer” (CP 2) – as Ackerman notes, “Thomas is always questioning concerning the response of the labourer to the land he tills,” probing into his ability to feel the beauty of the natural world (“Man and Nature” 16).

The rural setting in Thomas’s verse links thus inextricably with, and functions as a means of delineating the human figure that is placed within it. The consistent method of constructing protagonists in metaphorical relation to the natural world has the effect of inscribing them into that world. To put it differently, it carries out a naturalisation of man, so to speak, and turns nature into an organic foundation of being, of all life, including ours. Nature’s ascendancy is additionally indicated through the metaphor of the elements and anthropomorphisation, accompanying divers motifs of its domination over man. In this way, as I have hoped to show, the poet’s technique itself becomes the crucial means of portraying the relationship between the two as an ambivalent one, comprising both a life-giving identity and a destructive impact due to nature’s humanity-effacing power. Whether positive or negative in the effect of its workings, nature is thus bestowed a salient position in Thomas’s reflections on what it means to be man, and on the differentiating moment between the thinking, admiring and wondering creature that man potentially is, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the natural rhythms of biological matter.19 These texts resemble the poems Thomas wrote on

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19 Thus, in “Extraordinary Man,” Patrick Crotty sees Thomas’s farmer protagonists as “employed by the poet to dramatize questions about the relationship between articulacy, consciousness and definitions of the human” (15). The critic further elaborates: “The poems are not in any exclusive sense ‘about’ the hard lives and restricted horizons of the ‘peasants’ to whom Thomas ministered. Rather, they take those lives and horizons as the starting point for their exploration of a wide range of concerns” (17). In specifying these concerns, the critic reminds us of the poet’s own admission that he attempts “to understand the countryman in Manafon as a man, and mak[e] him a symbol of the relationship that existed between man and the earth in the contemporary world of the machine” (R.S. Thomas, qtd. in Crotty 17).
the hiding Deity, in the sense that they all emerge as a type of Thomasian “probing” into fundamental mysteries of existence.

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Having examined nature in the roles of motif and setting, let us turn now to those texts where it provides the main theme. One of those is “The View from the Window” (CP 81), a poem governed by a comparison of a landscape to a painting. It is not insignificant that the equivalence is introduced right from the start, through the opening simile: such a position exhibits its role as the dominant, imposed upon the whole utterance.20

Thus the speaker engages in an artistic quasi-critique assessing the “work,” and addressing the problematics of colour, the quality of the paint, or the “brush” and its success in capturing “light and distance”:

Like a painting it is set before one,
But less brittle, ageless; these colours
Are renewed daily with variations
Of light and distance that no painter
Achieves or suggests. Then there is movement,
Change, as slowly the cloud bruises
Are healed by sunlight, or snow caps
A black mood; but gold at evening
To cheer the heart. All through history
The great brush has not rested,
Nor the paint dried; yet what eye,
Looking coolly, or, as we now,
Through the tears’ lenses, ever saw
This work and it was not finished?

Judgement is passed in the form of an assertion that the “view from the window” is similar to but better than a canvas – paradoxically “less brittle, ageless,” in spite of all its mutability. We have of course heard quite a few similar propositions in poetry, of which the epigrammatic locution of Walter Savage Landor’s “Dying Speech of an Old Philosopher” – “Nature I loved, and, next to Nature, Art” –

20 For more on the notion of the dominant, see Jakobson “Dominant.”
provides a good example. But even if the inexorable debate about the hierarchy of various types of beauty has as often as not witnessed the depreciation of art relative to nature, Thomas’s contention still seems an interesting one. In this poem, the argument reaches, in a perverse way, for the understanding of an artwork as immortalising what otherwise would only be a fleeting experience, born and terminated in time. What Keats’s “Ode on Grecian Urn” (213) canonized as a representative of eternity in the transient universe, becomes perishable again in Thomas’s poem, which intimates that paintings are products of paint, susceptible – like all matter – to what Shakespeare in “Sonnet 19” calls “devouring time” (12). The adjective “brittle” conjures up the image of arid museums where years dry and crumble the paint off the exhibited works (see later “the paint dried”), or make the “colours” fade so that they need to be “renewed.” The poet of “The View from the Window” shakes hands with Wordsworth and Coleridge rather than with Keats, or with Friedrich Schlegel, for whom the world was “a work of art eternally giving birth to itself” (Roberts and Murphy 71).

The motif’s suggestive and associative powers are not exhausted with that affinity for Schlegelian philosophy – it refers fundamentally, here, to the daily cycle of the sun, a cycle that offers “variations of light.” But then, considering colours in such terms, the poem puts itself on the same shelf as impressionist art theories. This adds yet another semantically pregnant layer to “brittle”: the impressionist technique – as we can see for instance in Monet’s Rouen Cathedral – renders a depicted scene in a way that foregrounds the ephemeral touches of light, a dappled dab-crumbly flecky-flickery unsolidity. Monet’s style comes strongly to mind here, not least due to his noted obsession with variation. The selection of motifs here and the associations with which their context endows the epithet “brittle,” are all elements supporting the framing simile and the equivalence between the view and the painting it decrees.

In perceiving the instability of the viewed scene as undergoing a continuous Heraclitean-like process of transformation and cyclical renovation, the speaker is touching upon the temporal dynamic of “reality” as opposed to the static of a

21 See e.g.: “The Impressionists tended to think of color as light” (Elliott 496).
canvas. Paradoxically, “change,” “movement,” and “variations” do not preclude there being one single “the view” (emphasis mine). Clearly, the speaker must have in mind not a particular view, but a particular landscape and the sum total of all views of it ever taken and ever to be taken.

Indeed, he seems to proceed now to give examples of its diverse variants or their constitutive elements, such as clouds and sunlight, in a way that brings to mind the old dictum “Post nubila, Phoebus.” The succession in time – clouds give way to the sun – is rendered in the composition by way of spacing the two elements in consecutive lines so that sunlight comes after cloud in both the fictional universe of the poem and in the real time of the reader’s perusal. Inevitably, the line-break separating “the cloud bruises” from “[a]re healed by sunlight” endows the phrase “the cloud bruises” with line-specific functionality – an instance of the ambiguity-creating tension between syntax and verse divisions that Thomas persistently explores in his works.\textsuperscript{22} The motivation behind the metaphor lies with all probability in the colouring of a bruise, akin to that of a stormy sky. By the same token, the experience of a sullen sky seems here to be brimming with emotional overtones: the verb “bruise” suggests (cloud’s? nature’s?) aggression, and rings with (whose?) pain. The abrupt end to the line leaves the object of bruising unspecified and the reader free – in a lyrical poem – to guess at its being the speaker himself (bruise is after all what happens to living organisms rather than skies).

In other words, the enjambment promotes the impression that the view has an emotional impact on the viewer, who suffers whenever the sky gets overcast. Our language abounds in expressions tethering cloud to unhappiness, trouble, or worry; and, there is the traditional association of rain with tears, that found so

\textsuperscript{22} Thomas’s penchant for enjambment has been noticed by Westover and provides for a major object of scrutiny in \textit{Stylistic Biography} (esp. 80-114). For Westover, however, the “interplay between lineation and grammar” (80) is connected to “exploration of individual psychology” (96) as “lines . . . trace, and mirror, the speaker’s thought processes” (80). According to the critic, “[t]he linear prosody . . . tracks the fear and hesitancy surrounding self-examination” (101), and, ultimately, the poems become “iconic, mimetic forms of a consciousness that perceives world as disjointed” (120). By contrast, the present study considers enjambment as a poetic method of achieving semantic enrichment, through generating two reading contexts (that of a line and that of a sentence).
striking an expression in the Polish poet Leopold Staff’s “Deszcz jesienny” [Autumn Rain]. The metaphor hangs upon those connotations quite obviously. However, there seems to be still another layer to it. In the context of the phrase only, “bruises” functions as a verb, a role reinforced through the parallelism “cloud bruises / . . . or snow caps.” Thus, in what we could perhaps call a true Thomasian manner, active agency is indicated in the natural world – which thereby appears as something more than a non-personal matter, subject to time and weather. Although distant, associations seem to be triggered with the biblical cloud that augurs God’s punitive lighting-strike. The poem appears indebted to the Christian interpretation of storm as an expression of divine anger.23

Our hypothesis gains in validity as the following line also features suggestions of the biblical background to the poem’s presentation of landscape. The motif of the sun’s healing properties invokes Malachi 4:2: “But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings.” Christianity insists that the healing effect of the sun lies in its rays’ bringing spiritual wholeness and joy (Guzik). That there is an emotive aspect to the healing sunlight in the poem seems probable in view of the connotations we saw inherent in the motifs of cloud and bruising. Indeed, in the following line, natural phenomena are spoken of as creating and then remedying “a black mood.”

The metaphor “snow caps a black mood” plays on the polysemy of “mood” as referring to emotion, to an atmosphere pervading the landscape, and to a painting’s tonal characteristics. In a most obvious way, “snow” roots the comment in the description of the landscape. In this setting, “black” is the “mood” of a stark wintry scenery baring the damp, dark earth and sharpening the charcoal-dyed leafless tree-skeletons against the greyish sky. Just the same, the metaphor goes back to the strategy of appraising the view in terms of chromatics, disclosed in the first sentence (“these colours / Are renewed daily . . .”). “Black” brings out and engages with the snow’s white colouring, reminding us of the landscape’s similarity to an

23 Cf. Nahum 1:3: “The Lord is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked: the Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.” See also Hartley (366-67).
artefact. In turn, the speaker’s admission that “snow caps / A black mood . . . / To cheer the heart” brings to the fore the possible understanding of “black mood” in its most basic sense of an unhappy feeling. This last meaning of “mood” switches on such connotations attached to “black,” “snow,” and the implied white, as despondency, grief, or even mourning (in the case of “black”), and gladness, joy, solace, calm, or peacefulness (in the case of white and snow).  

An impression begins to emerge that the poem deploys a consistent, multi-layered strategy for portraying the landscape. First, the speaker’s locution allows him to remain in compliance with the governing equivalence between the view and a painting. Second, in accord with the impressionist technique, it seems to reveal an underlying tactic of addressing its colour-cum-light characteristics, in which colour and light seem to be two facets of the same thing (as we saw, the speaker proclaims his interest in colour, but all colours mentioned or implied are here expressive of a certain quality of light depending on the weather and season represented, and are topped with the motifs of cloud and sunlight). Third, it offers suggestions emigrating beyond simple description and implying additional, superimposed – emotional and numinous – aspects to the natural world. When another colour, “gold,” is added to the list, it is teamed up with “evening,” and thus tied in with light-related phenomena again, namely with the sunset. In this, the poem seems to reach for the traditional perception of “gold” that focuses on the metal’s ability to shine, relating the colour to the sun, purity, immortality, and the divine.

With a semantic load like that, “gold” functions as opposite to “black” (hence their linking with “but”). Here, another aspect of the speaker’s strategy comes to light. A paradoxical universe is born out of the marriage of opposites, a delineation of which must also significantly rely on adversative conjunctions (there are three of them – “but,” “but,” “yet” – in the three sentences that compose the text). The speaker patterns his textual universe upon contrast, “sketching” it with white and black, black “but” gold, cloud and sun – all pregnant with similarly antonymous

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24 My discussion of associations and connotations attached to various colours is based on Michael Ferber’s Dictionary of Literary Symbols (the entries “white,” “gold,” and “black”).
connotations, such as darkness and light, joy and grief, or aggression and soothing. The great “artwork” of nature manages to fit various opposites in the same frame. We may say that its description unfolds via a sequence of mutually contrasting colours and characteristics, foregrounding the across-the-spectrum comprehensiveness of its “variations.” The strategy constitutes a powerful means of rendering the all-embracing mutability of the landscape that is everything in turn, not unlike that of James Thomson’s The Seasons. Continuously in progress (“All through history / The great brush has not rested / Nor the paint dried”) and “yet” always “finished,” “bruis[ing]” and “heal[ing],” “black . . . but gold,” temporal and “ageless,” like and unlike a painting, the natural world emerges as simply amazing, even miraculous in its richness and complexity. It is the grand artwork “no painter could achieve or suggest,” a work that must have had a Divine Creator. This is to say, it manifests itself as Opus Dei.

Given the poem’s praise of the great artefact of nature, it is important that it is the “great brush” – brush, not painting! – which is explicitly applauded: what might at first seem a simple appreciation of visual beauty is enriched with a deeper dimension of worship for its Creator. This is to say, “The View from the Window” demonstrates indebtedness to the hymnal tradition of Gloria Deo. This speaker might sing with Hopkins “Glory be to God for dappled things” (30). We see here an experience of the world that is profoundly religious, akin to that of Henry Vaughan’s “Rules and Lessons” (195):

Observe God in his works; here fountains flow,
Birds sing, beasts feed, fish leap, and the earth stands fast;
Above are restless motions, running lights,
Vast circling azure, giddy clouds, days, nights.

When seasons change, then lay before thine eyes
His wondrous method; mark the various scenes
In heaven; hail, thunder, rain-bows, snow, and ice,
Calms, tempests, light, and darkness by his means;
Thou canst not miss his praise; each tree, herb, flower
Are shadows of his wisdom, and his power.”

Set in this light, “The View from the Window” emerges as Thomas’s closest approach to devotional poetry.
Thomas’s poem consists of three sentences in fourteen lines. The first sentence occupies four full lines to be brought to a halt in the middle of the fifth, and the second one sits across the subsequent four lines, ending half way through the ninth. The last is subdivided with a semi-colon into two clauses of around three lines each. Even though there are no stanzas or rhymes, these versification and syntactical arrangements show that the poem’s composition roughly follows that of the Italian sonnet. Indeed, while the two sentences forming the quasi-octave are anchored in presentation of the natural world, the two tercet-like clauses of the “sestet” abandon description in favour of reflection and a more direct lyrical expression. The change in mode matches a similar shift in subject: the divine author of the view and the human author of “The View from the Window” now take a more central stage. The metonym of “the great brush” casts an illuminating light on the equivalence between the view and a painting, rooting it in the medieval metaphor of God as the ultimate Artist, and allowing us to finally see the reason for the speaker’s earlier siding with Wordsworth and Coleridge: the superiority of nature over art lies in the superiority of the divine over the human maker. Rounding up his commentary, the speaker offers the conclusion that God’s creative hand has been active “all through history” without having “rested.” “The View from the Window” discovers Divinity in the world, drawing our attention to the continuity of Genesis, to God’s never-stopping engagement and care. This is an amazing discovery in a time of “a desacralised universe, where God is not seen as playing an active part in the world – the age of miracles is over” (Barry Morgan 17). As if against the character of today, this poem clearly does not subscribe to the Deus absconditus theory.

As I observed earlier, many critics are committed to the view that Thomas’s experience of nature is spiritualised; at the same time, however, they remain

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25 For an in-depth discussion of the notion of Deus Artifex, see Kris and Kurz Legend. For more on the concept of nature as God’s art in Coleridge’s poetry, see Mary Rahme “Symbolism” (627).
26 It is therefore hard to agree here without reservations with Herman’s claim that “[n]ature, which should normally reveal ‘evidence’ of its Creator, remains mute under interrogation, stubborn in its materiality, silent to the challenge of any other truth” (714).
strangely reticent as to how this is realised in verse. In “The View from the Window,” the depiction of the countryside hints at God as the creator of nature’s miracle through allusions to the Scriptures, through the suggestion of eternity inherent in “ageless,” or through ambiguity of words and phrasing that betrays a conviction of there being some form of consciousness governing the physical universe. The poem is important for our investigations in that it embraces a range of features marking also other Thomas’s nature poems. It seems that more generally the pivotal means of conveying a sense of holiness in the natural world is provided by the simile, which explicitly verbalises a supernatural dimension to the perceived scenery, interpreted in terms of Christianity.

Such similes institute for instance the governing equivalences of “The Moor” (CP 166) and “Moorland” (CP 513), two poems set with all probability in the grassland covering the area between Y Migneint and Llanddewibrefi. The opening of “The Moor” draws a direct connection between the lea and a church (“It was like a church to me”) where also, Eucharist-like, “the air crumbled / And broke on me generously as bread.” “Moorland,” too, informs us right from the beginning of the speaker’s experience of nature as a sacred space:

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.

Given its persistently religious dimension, the liking for the simile that Thomas’s nature poems display can perhaps be looked at in light of Rudolf Otto’s theological

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27 Thomas admits visiting this moorland in “No-one” (100).
propositions, in particular his postulate of speaking about the Divinity through similarity. Holiness, as Otto reminds us, eludes apprehension in terms of notions, and “[a]ll language, in so far as it consists of words, purports to convey ideas or concepts” (2). Negative theology notwithstanding, the scholar proposes that “[t]here is only one way to help another to an understanding” of the numinous experience, which is

by bringing before his notice all that can be found in other regions of the mind, already known and familiar, to resemble, or again to afford some special contrast to, the particular experience we wish to elucidate. Then we must add: ‘This X of ours is not precisely this experience, but akin to this one and the opposite of that other. . . .’ In other words, our X cannot, strictly speaking, be taught, it can only be evoked . . . (7)

The power of the simile strategy certainly lies in its enabling of a consistently double-layered depiction of the natural world in accordance with two contexts that it provides. The spiritual context wrought by virtue of such device impinges then on the semantics of particular signs and motifs, accenting their religious resonances.

The dominant equivalence between the heath and the Lord’s House in the above-quoted “Moorland” implies, by extension, a kinship between their two inhabitants. While the participle “quartering,” in the following stanza, designates the raptor’s movement, from point to point, over its hunting grounds, the moor’s correspondence to the House of God also validates in the poem a sense of “quartering” as taking up quarters, inhabiting “the bare earth.” The general designation “earth,” instead of the specific “moorland,” draws the reader’s attention to that metaphorical aspect, in light of which the passage can be read as alluding to God’s abode in the physical realm, with all its theological implications including Incarnation and Eucharist. This is to say, the motif of “quartering” promotes our interpretation of the harrier as a figure of God in his Second Person.

An important role in buttressing such similes across Thomas’s oeuvre is played by adjectives expressive of the glory of nature, and intimating, more or less subtly, divine features. In “Moorland,” “rarefied” can be understood in its extended sense of “refined,” “elevated,” or “exalted,” as a cathedral itself is not just any place of worship but a locale of magnificence and majesty, a “beautiful” site, a mise-en-scène that compels the observer’s adoration. The overall impression is that of
something precious, exceptional – a scene of *sacrum*. In “Sea-Watching” (CP 306), in turn, the sea’s being “vast” provides an even clearer example, due to intrinsic connotations of immeasurability and thus a quasi-divine infinity. Similar in this respect is also the motif of the “immensities” in “The White Tiger” (CP 358).

In that last poem, diverse means of investing the physical world with spiritual aspects can be traced in a more detailed reading, ranging from phonetically triggered associations, for instance, to ellipsis and repetition:

> It was beautiful as God
> must be beautiful; glacial
eyes that had looked on
violence and come to terms

> with it; a body too huge
and majestic for the cage in which
it had been put; up
and down in the shadow

> of its own bulk it went,
lifting, as it turned,
the crumpled flower of its face
to look into my own

> face without seeing me. It
was the colour of the moonlight
on snow and as quiet
as moonlight, but breathing

> as you can imagine that
God breathes within the confines
of our definition of him, agonising
over immensities that will not return.

The opening expression of the speaker’s admiration for the animal that “was beautiful as God / must be beautiful” hinges vitally on an omission of “as” before the adjective in order to strengthen the suggestion that the cat’s beauty results from its comparability to the Deity. Clearly, even if not traditionally, the adjective itself enlists beauty into God’s attributes. Its repetition further supports this suggestion as the same descriptor applies now to both entities.

The overall presentation of the animal focuses around its quasi-divine features, emphasising the points of resemblance, even if not in a directly obvious
way. The phonetic similarity of “eyes” and “ice” reveals that the principal connotation of “glacial” here is one of coldness. The epithet undoubtedly refers to the beast’s blue irises (one of the distinctive marks of the subspecies) complementing its snowy-white fur. By the same token, the meaning of the epithet as bespeaking emotional detachment and as exposing the predator’s discompassionate nature is made clear in the following lines, with their mention of “violence” and of the carnivore’s habituation to it (“glacial / eyes that had looked on / violence and come to terms / with it”). This tiger belongs in a world which is governed by the survival of the fittest. Accordingly, the second stanza turns to an examination of the brute’s “body,” reaching the verdict that it is “huge” and “majestic.” The depiction of the tiger centres thus on a specific aspect of the tiger, namely its strength and potency. “Huge” and “majestic” join forces with “beautiful” as terms of admiration, reconciling beauty with predator’s grandeur – reminding us of William Blake’s “The Tyger” and its “fearful symmetry” (214-15).

Startlingly, this embodiment of supremacy turns out to be in a “cage.” The second stanza strikes the reader with a counter-perspective on the tiger, informing us of its current lack of power. As the metaphor “the crumpled flower of its face” suggests, the beauty, which the predator possessed and for which the “flower” stands, is now all but a matter of the past. The poet invokes here the English poetic tradition which associates flowers with fragility and mortality, as George Herbert did in “Life” (91). While the epithet “crumpled” can be traced down to the tiger’s stripes – lines optically “folding” the face, as it were – it also spells out the flower’s withered state. Interestingly, the repetition of “face” – referring once to the tiger and once to the speaker – communicates physical similitude and analogy between the two, in effect humanising the animal. This has two related consequences. First, a nexus of equivalences seems thus to be forged, binding God, the natural world represented by the creature, and man, and proposing a certain unity in the universe. Second, the introduction of the human element in an equation of correspondences interconnecting God and the Creation raises expectations of the

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28 Such unity can perhaps be perceived in light of the mystical tradition. See e.g. Clements (6-7 and passim).
solution in the form of Christ as the intermediary participating in both Divinity, on the one hand, and the Creation, on the other.

Indeed, the following stanza draws a parallel between the white tiger and moon in the simile “as quiet as moonlight” and in its characterisation of the animal’s colour. The pale, cold type of light agrees perfectly with the earlier metaphor of “glacial eyes,” thereby perpetuating the presentation of the tiger as emotionally indifferent towards the surrounding world. Nonetheless, the simile seems also fed by an identification of the nightly orb with Christ, which, as we saw before, Thomas already proposed in the metaphor of “the moon of Jesus” (“The Moon in Lleyn” CP 282). The simile re-works the paradox of a supreme power living in a cage, casting it as the crucible of God inhabiting the mortal body (while the “cage” starts thus to ring of an imprisonment in a rib-cage).

Such a reading is furthered by the antithesis of “quiet . . . but breathing.” The adversative conjunction binding the two motifs sets them in opposition, so that they qualify each other according to the principle of contrast. Juxtaposed with “quiet,” the motif of respiration draws from the common association of breath with life. In turn, in the context of “breathing,” the tiger’s being “quiet” provokes associations with death (hence, the beast is “agonising”). The tacit paradox of “Dominus dominated” in the poem’s description of the divine beast links here to the mystery of Incarnation, specifically the mystery of Immortal Creator who came to the Earth to die.30

“The View from the Window” and “The White Tiger” are not the only poems relying on paradox. In the previously-quoted “Moorland,” the harrier possesses conspicuously self-contradictory characteristics, being, as it is, “snow-soft, but with claws of fire.” Of course, the metaphorical epithet “snow-soft” can be tracked down to the harrier’s look, specifically to the white colouring of the soft, fluffy chest

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30 It has been pointed out on numerous occasions, by scholars such as Christopher Morgan, that the contemplative experience is about seeing the Creation as reflecting the Creator, but is distinct from pantheism, i.e. it does not postulate identity (55). In other words, the tiger manifests the glory of Creation and reflects that of the Creator, but is not the Creator. Nature, as Morgan explains, is “sacred not because it is God but rather, by association, as the creation and revelation of a God which it reflects and to whom it leads back again” (55).

93
feathers of some of its subspecies, or to its ability to fall down from the sky as lightly and quietly as a snow flake. But the resultant, surprising parallel between the raptor and the snow suggests as well the bird’s delicate gentleness, complemented with its sharp “claws of fire.”

The description is spiced up here with poetic erudition as the poem reminds us of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “The Windhover,” and its “fire that breaks from thee, a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous” (30). In Hopkins’s poem, fire signals the falcon’s energy and power, carries connotations of God, and denotes the state of the lyrical ego, “carried away by the sight of the windhover” (Doyle 90). All these senses operate in “Moorland” too. While obviously referring to the bird’s talons, the phrasing “claws of fire” also brings to mind the shape of flames. The metaphor brings into prominence the predator’s aggressive nature, throwing the spotlight onto one of the bird’s instruments of killing, thereby awakening the traditional associations of fire with warfare and destruction. But in the fire’s power, religions have also seen majestic divinity – God is a consuming fire, says Deuteronomy 4:24, and Donne’s “I am a little world made cunningly . . .” follows suit with its plea “burn me O Lord, with a fiery zeal / Of thee and thy house, which doth in eating heal” (13). Such a reading of “fire” as one “which doth in eating heal” allows for an understanding of the paradox of a bird simultaneously harmless and capable of harming.

Critics like Christopher Morgan and Barry Morgan have noted the paradoxical character of nature in Thomas's poetry, illuminating it against the poet's general preoccupation with nature’s beauty, on the one hand, and with the more sinister aspect of life organised upon the Darwinian “survival of the fittest” principle, on the other. They anchor their observations in the poet's numerous prose comments on the topic.³¹ In this light, it is possible to see the universe of “Moorland” as revelatory of tension inherent in nature, nature which mixes loveliness with brutality. This view, however, demands a reservation: it hinges on the specific notion of beauty as benign.

³¹ See (Christopher Morgan 70-83); (Barry Morgan 35-38).
It seems to me that beauty in Thomas’s nature poetry to a certain extent consists in power – ruthless though it may be. The admiring perspective on the harrier or the pheomelanin-deficient Panthera tigris tigris, adopted in “Moorland” and “The White Tiger” respectively, suggests not that beauty is in the natural world “alongside” brutality as Barry Morgan makes out (35), but rather that one is, or subsumes, the other. This is to say, Thomas’s speaker – like the one of “The Windhover” – sees that beauty in the grandeur of the predator (both “dangerous” and “lovelier”). The depiction of the bird in “Moorland” is, in Christopher Morgan’s words, “a realisation by the narrator of a more brutal reality exploding that notion of the romantic pastoral . . . Thomas’s poems, like those of Ted Hughes, become suddenly surprising and unique expressions of nature not as tamed and predictable but as harbouring equally a wildness, a fierceness which, while often frightening to confront, can also, ultimately, be freeing as recognition of beauty which has its source and logic in powers beyond human reason” (51). Morgan’s last insight especially warrants attention here, as it touches on deeper implications of the predator’s portrayal. For its inherent paradox is at its roots a religious question. In the eyes of a believer, God is love but He is also terrifying in His overwhelming, awe-inspiring sovereignty. Otto describes Divine majesty in terms similar to those we can ascribe to a raptor: energy, force, vitality, passion, activity, movement, violence (23). He goes on to characterise the experience of the Holy as involving “that ‘consuming fire’ of love” which “claims a perceptible kinship with the ὀργή itself, the scorching and consuming wrath of God. . . . ‘Love,’ says one of the mystics, ‘is nothing else than quenched wrath’” (24). What Otto tells us about is usually expressed in Christianity through the notion of God as tremenda majestas, awful majesty. In “Moorland” and “The White Tiger,” the marriage of splendour and power does not belong in the pastoral, but seems to have roots in the Christian tradition, and delineates Opus Dei as amazing and miraculous like its Creator.

One function of Thomas’s tendency to stretch his pictures of the natural world on the frame of paradox is thus to indicate that miraculous character, and also therewith to impart a sense of mystery in that world, an inexplicable realm which is “wonder”-full and “wonder”-compelling. In these poems, the experience of
nature exposes itself as an experience of wonder. This is how another of Thomas’s poems on birds, namely “Swifts” from Pietà (9), speaks of it:

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.

Sometimes they glide,
Or rip the silk of the wind
In passing. Unseen ribbons
Are trailing upon the air.
There is no solving the problem
They pose, that had millions of years
Behind it, when the first thinker
Looked at them.

Sometimes they meet
In the high air; what is engendered
At contact? I am learning to bring
Only my wonder to the contemplation
Of the geometry of their dark wings.

The poem offers a lyrical statement on the inadequacy of human understanding in meeting with such marvel. We find a contribution to this statement in the speaker’s deviation from the usual word order in the second sentence of the poem. There, instead of the more natural “It is pleasant to watch them at the end of the day,” he moves “To watch them” to the end of the sentence, so that it appears in one line with “I have shut the mind.” In effect, the speaker provokes us to launch here into a line-by-line perusal, suggesting that the act of observing the swifts demands renouncing “mind” and thus an attempt to penetrate the witnessed scene intellectually. Similar admissions have also been voiced in “The River” (CP 226), where the speaker owns up to “bring[ing] the heart / Not the mind to the interpretation / Of [the fishes’] music.”32 In “Swifts,” the suggestion is reinforced by the signals of ending and closure (“end,” “shut,” “over”) to the regular busy day full of (the “frenzy” of) phone calls and attending to other people.

32 Cf. also “Barn Owl” (NTF 72).
More conspicuously, however, giving up on an intellectual approach is rendered through the utterance’s sensory character – specifically, through sound orchestration. It begins as soon as the first line, marked by the repetition of the /wɪ/ cluster in “swifts” and “winnow,” which brings wind to mind and quasi-onomatopoeically illustrates the birds’ gliding-swishing movement. In the same stanza, an enjambment puts “fools” and “phone’s frenzy” in the same line space. The apostrophe in front of “phone” lays bare the conscious shortening of the “telephone” into “phone” to enable the sound /f/ to occupy the frontal position. Although the consonant does not belong to sibilants, its accumulation in the line highlights the ringing “frenzy,” evoking noise as well as a certain feverishness attributed to human interaction. The alliteration also establishes some kind of interconnection between the “fools,” “phone” and “frenzy” – the telecommunications device is inscribed here in a context of negatively valued words, thereby assuming a pejorative tone as well. There is also a belittlement and denigration of people there (tagged as “fools”). The speaker seems to suggest that he has withdrawn from the frenetic world shared with other people into its opposite of Mother Nature, the dominion of calm and peace.

As soon as the speaker quits sketching the circumstances and the birds dynamically re-enter the poem’s lines, the quietude is shattered with an outburst of the swishing consonant /s/. The passage leans heavily on alliteration (“swifts,” “restlessness,” “sky,” “squealing”) and onomatopoeia (“restlessness,” “squealing,” “shriill”). This certainly provides an effective means of conveying the birds’ noisiness, their chirping and the sound of their speedy flight. Moreover, the abundance of letters “s” underscores the epicentre-like word “restlessness”: as the name of the birds’ species suggests, swifts belong to the fastest fliers among birds and are noted for their reluctance to rest on the ground or on any horizontal surface.

The “ripping” in the second stanza contributes to the above suggestions. In a manner typical of this poem, the metaphor “rip the silk of the wind” harnesses the sound to its aims, cutting the line into a set of short, single-syllable words with the /ɪ/ vowel at the core – aurally “illustrating” the theme of tearing, as it were. The equivalence between wind and silk credits the air current with softness and
delicacy, contrasting it with the stronger dynamic of the birds and thereby accentuating their impetuosity and energy. The ribbons of wind’s torn fabric are merely “trailing” behind the avian incarnations of speed.

“Swifts” is fairly typical of Thomas’s poems on nature in its sensory character. Likewise, “A Thicket in Lleyn” (CP 511), yet another poem on birds, is also rich, in the first stanza, in the voiced plosive /b/ (“birds,” “budding,” “boughs,” “blackberry-bright”), /l/ (“re-leafed,” “filtered,” “like sunlight,” “looked,” “blackberry”), as well as the long vowels and diphthongs /i:/ (“tree,” “trees,” “re-leafed,” “three feet,” “seeing,” “free”), /ai/ (“I,” “migrants,” “eyes,” “like sunlight,” “bright”), /au/ (“south,” “boughs”), and /ei/ (“they,” “way,” “caged”) – giving the impression of and poetically rendering, with this intensity, the “budding with notes” of which the text speaks:

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.

A variant of this strategy can be found in “Sea-Watching” (CP 306), where the graphical layout, “the ‘wavering’ of the lines . . . mimic[s] the waves of the sea” (William V. Davis, “Theological Crisis” 383):

Grey waters, vast
as an area of prayer
that one enters. Daily
over a period of years
I have let the eye rest on them.
Was I waiting for something?

Nothing
but that continuous waving
that is without meaning
occurred.
... 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.

As if to highlight, to spell out directly, this visual quality of the experience, the poet specifically mentions “the eye” as the perceiver of the view. It is in the same light that we can see his mentioning of this organ of vision in “The Moor,” where God “made himself felt / . . . in clean colours / That brought a moistening of the eye” (CP 166), or his substitution with “eye” for the personal “I” qua the cognising entity in “The View from the Window” (“yet what eye, / Looking . . . / Through the tears’ lenses, ever saw / This work”). In these last two poems, a remark about or an allusion to tears appears: it seems that facing the marvellous world is an affair not only intellectually puzzling, but also deeply moving.

I want to finish this analysis of Thomas’s nature poems by pausing for a while on the very fact of presenting the speaker’s emotion, as well as the manner in which this is carried out and its implications. It seems that in the texts examined above, the speaker touches on the influence that nature has on him, rather than just endowing it simply and merely with the role of illustrating his state of mind and putting it thereby in a secondary, subordinate role. Lyrical poetry is always about subjective experience. But this experience can be spelled out more or less explicitly – confessional poetry, for instance, will differ in that respect from specifically descriptive poetry. Shifting the balance of focus from the subject towards the object, at least on the most obvious level, Thomas’s nature poems

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33 Admittedly, the plural subject “we,” which appears in one of the sentence’s clauses, as well as the metonymy of the “eye” itself generalise the speaker’s observations, putting him in one row with all human beings, and de-concretising “the” view, which may be perceived as synonymous with any sight of the natural world. The “eye,” however, serves here also as a pun on “I,” attributing the tears implicitly to the speaker himself, and indicating the intensity of his experience.

34 One is recalled here of Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality”: “To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (Poems 259).
clearly inform us of their poetics. In as much as it concerns itself with what is being beholden, a sensuous perception of the world naturally lends itself to a descriptive style. Based crucially on simile, spelling out explicitly its reliance on sensory observation, this is predominantly a descriptive, contemplative verse, which lyrically expresses experiences of wonder and admiration.

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This chapter has reviewed multifarious poetic strategies relating to nature in Thomas’s verse. Given that these strategies differ depending on the role which the natural world occupies in a given text, a diversity of such roles has been explored, from the function of nature motifs in developing the speaker’s argument, to the centrality of countryside in fashioning the setting and the protagonist, as well as the institution of landscapes and animals as themes. In reading Thomas’s nature poems, an abundance of the poet’s methods for achieving poetic richness of meaning came to light, including his drawing from cultural associations and biblical echoes, using a single word in two different grammatical forms, marshalling semantically multivalent words, as well as inserting such words into mutual cooperation with other motifs and into the double contexts generated by enjambment and simile. In these poems, reliance on paradox is telling of an experience of the natural world as marvellous and incomprehensible. Nature also provides for Thomas a contemplatio loci; its delineation is governed by descriptive poetics, which embrace sound orchestration and/or graphical ordering so as to render the aural and/or visual character of the experience of nature respectively.

In my discussion, I have also pointed to the synecdochic character of nature motifs and their application as ingredients of Thomas’s ruminations on God and the universe. Interestingly, his poetic landscapes set nature also in relation to the human figure, which remains metaphorically melded to its background and inseparable from the environmental context. Nature thus emerges as equally indispensable in Thomas’s reflection on man and his distinctiveness as the homo sapiens species living within – as a part of and yet as different from – the physical world. Nature’s versatility, and the importance it holds in his oeuvre, suggests that
it constitutes the core rather than just a part of Thomas’s poetic vision. One could perhaps even argue that it amounts, for the poet, to the living force at the roots of all existence, close in its essentiality to what William Scammel in *This Green Earth: A Celebration of Nature Poetry* terms “the ground of being” (13). This importance of nature in Thomas’s poetics is in itself a feature linking his verse with that of the Romantics.35

By the same token, it tells us that even the strongest focus on the transcendent Supreme Absolute does not preclude a more “earthly” perspective, an interest in the surrounding world – a domain of natural beauty (and power), but also a home to human beings. It is to Thomas’s poetic encounters with man that I want to turn now in the following chapter.

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35 Cf. “The English love affair with nature goes a long way, taking different forms at different periods, and reaching its height in the Romantic revolution of 1770-1820” (Scammel 12).
Chapter 3: People in Experience

No poet writes in a social vacuum or has no interest in fellow human beings, not even the reclusive “ogre of Wales,” as Thomas was dubbed in an article by The Telegraph (Martin). While perhaps, for some, Thomas’s poems in pursuit of the absent God may predominate, his poetic encounters with people are by no means insignificant in number, and remain for others “the ones that matter most” (Hamilton). Certainly they form a part of his oeuvre that is impossible to ignore. Already, on first glance, one can see Thomas’s preoccupation with the figure of the farmer, who haunts the pages of the poet’s early volumes. Critics have also commented on Thomas’s love poems and heeded to his treatment of women in general, as well as commenting on the influence of several poets, writers and thinkers on his writings. This chapter is not aimed at assessing Thomas’s attitude – either as the implied author or as a person – towards the people crowding his works. Neither is it concerned with establishing what the image is of Welsh smallholders, women, or other persons in his poetry. Instead, this chapter looks at the basic “laws” or principles – going beyond particular type(s) of protagonist – governing the experience of man as it is expressed in verse. I do so, specifically, by investigating the poet’s treatment of descriptive detail as well as his reliance on conventions of occasional poetry.

What does it mean for a poet to speak of an encounter? It would seem that a meeting takes place in space and time, that it demands grounding in, as Ann Stevenson put it in “The Uses of Prytherch,” an “immediacy of the poem’s occasion” (79). Sometimes, indeed, a poem makes the situation of the utterance explicit. This is the case, for instance, with “[i]n front of the fire / With you” in “The Hearth” (CP

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1 The farmer in Thomas’s poetry has exacted the attention of Ann Stevenson, H.J. Savill, Ward, and Crotty (“Extraordinary Man”).

2 For in-depth commentary on Thomas’s literary portrayals of women and wife, see Tom Ellis “Unrewarding Marriage,” Dafydd “Women,” or Tony Brown’s articles “Poems to Wife” and “Identity and Gender.” For the influence of writers and thinkers, see e.g. Perry Chameleon Poet, Damian Walford Davies “Yeats Said That,” Rowan Williams “Kierkegaard,” or a number of articles by William V. Davis.
222). Such a poem would also presumably involve some clues as to particulars concerning the physical appearance or other qualities of the person encountered. An encounter as understood in this study may also be mediated (for instance, through art, thought, or simply history) as in “Coleridge” (SYT 100), “Homage to Paul Klee” (NTF 75), or “Henry James” (CP 336). Such poems, we can expect, would draw from biographical and other relevant material. Thus, Kierkegaard’s unfortunate love affair with Regine Olsen – “Hapless Regine / with her moonlight hair” – found its way into Thomas’s poetry (“S.K.” NTF 15), as did the fact that Wallace Stevens spoke of himself as “Pennsylvania Dutch” on his mother’s side (qtd. in Richardson 10), making her “a girl out of Holland” (“Wallace Stevens” CP 135).

In the above-mentioned “Wallace Stevens,” however, the overall poetic procedure becomes more complex:

The baby was dropped at the first fall
Of the leaf, wanting the safe bough
He came from, and was for years dumb,
Mumbling the dry crust
Of poetry, until the teeth grew,
Ivory of a strange piano.

Admittedly, beginning with inception and birth and closing with death, the poem pretends to be *curriculum vitae*-like summary of the American Modernist’s life story. However, the “fall” in the above quotation functions not only in the sense of autumn (as an allusion to Stevens’s date of birth on October 2), but above all it works as a prop for the imagery of a tree and the falling leaves, amongst which the protagonist is metaphorically inscribed. This punning capacity justifies Thomas’s use of American diction, suitable also in speaking of a citizen of the United States.

The female subject of “Farm Wife” (CP 94), in turn, has a voice

That coaxes time back to the shadows
In the room’s corners. O, hers is all
This strong body, the safe island
Where men may come, sons and lovers
Daring the cold seas of her eyes.
While possibly originating in visual experience, the poet’s portrayal of her as possessed of a brawny physique is equally (if not more) dictated by the poet’s scheme of stressing her power as a woman: that is, as someone who occupies the central position in the domiciliary circle. She is put in the kitchen, with “the clean apron,” “while the white dough / Turns to pastry in the great oven” – altogether a picture of the domestic. Her role as the supreme household keeper is then cemented through the metaphorical identification of the “strong body” with “the safe island,” directly affiliating her power with that of protectiveness. The complex metaphor of the seas, and of the male family members as sailors, bestows on her the character of a harbour, a common imaginary of a home. Interestingly, all these suggestions vie with some less positive (even if still awe-inspiring) qualities, implied in the “cold seas of her eyes” with its description of the iris’ colour hinting at emotional detachment, and even dangerousness. The account thus becomes a metaphorical comment on ambivalence as typical of the opposite sex.3

“Marriage” (CP 300) is another poem which illustrates this tendency to depart from simple description: as the speaker’s thought drifts to involve “dead” queens, “history” and “time [which] is always too short,” the movement spoken of in “I look up; you pass” no longer merely relates to the occasion when he sees his wife walking through the house. It refers also to the more general sense of time flowing and the person ageing, with the verb echoing of passing away. What happens in “Marriage,” “Farm Wife” and “Wallace Stevens,” is that a word or phrase which seems to record factual background is inserted in contexts that activate additional, not situation-specific meanings. As these poems demonstrate, the occasion-related or descriptive detail is introduced in Thomas’s text, more often than not, to be subjected to metaphorisation.4 Indeed, in reading his poetry, we cannot escape the conclusion that the circumstances have only been disclosed for the sake of their poetic potential.

3 Cf. e.g. “What was the heart’s depth? / There were fathoms in her, / too, and sometimes he crossed / them and landed and was not repulsed” (“He and She” CP 459).
4 For the manner in which the term “metaphorisation” is used in this thesis, see above Chapter 1 “Faith and Experience” (37 n.21).
In many cases, metaphorisation will lead the reader to doubt the factual value of the disclosed information: additional meanings are no longer merely superimposed on a given motif, which is thus supposed to work on two planes (the literal and the metaphorical), but its very performance as a means of rooting the experience in a particular occurrence becomes questionable.\(^5\) Thus, in “Two” (CP 311), “[s]he measured him / with her moist eye for the coat / always too big” only feigns to speak of sewing a garment. The fact that the coat is always oversized suggests that the scene should not be taken too seriously. The adverb defines it as a continuing state rather than an event, and the clothing seems actually to denote roles, or expectations, never fulfilled. Accordingly, the “moist eye” – conspicuous due to the singular rather than plural form – gives rise to a suspicion of unhappiness triggered by such disappointment.

Likewise, the depiction of Gwenallt as “[k]eeping close to the wall” in “A Lecturer” (CP 138) provokes questions about the nature of that enclosure; was it material, we wonder. The poem does not elaborate on the location, excepting the potential suggestion, implicit in the title, of a lecture theatre. Even if we were to accept that suggestion, the noun is completed with the abstracting phrase “of life,” and therefore it ultimately appears to indicate a prison-like feeling or frustration which results from some impossibility to break through.\(^6\) Given these effects, we necessarily conclude that the poetic trope works for Thomas as a de-concretising

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\(^5\) Indeed, not always does the biographical data provided by Thomas agree with the truth. In “S.K.” (NTF 15), for instance, the speaker’s statement “Like Christ we know little / of him when he was young” seems much of an overstatement given the family testimonies available, or the fact that Kierkegaard (for whom the initials in the title stand) left a diary from his youth, even if clarity fails to fall within the range of features marking its style. One might also be surprised by the comment “the Baltic, that extinct sea” in “A Grave Unvisited” (CP 183). The strategy of diverging from the facts is perhaps most striking in poems on Ann Griffiths. “There it is, / as she left it” of Ann’s home in Dolwar Fach (in “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” CP 470) obviously ignores the farm’s enlargement and architectural improvements. Moreover, Ann is presented as “still virgin” (“Dead Worthies” CP 467) and deprived of “bridegrooms that were not to be” (“Ann Griffith” [sic] CP 281), or at least with the husband “cuckolded / as Joseph” (“Fugue for Ann Griffiths” CP 471). This blatantly quarrels with the fact that she was a married woman who died as a result of a difficult childbirth. Cf. Dafydd (“Women” 127-28).

\(^6\) Cf. “The Window” (CP 501) as offering a slight variation of this motif.
Having pinpointed the vitality of metaphor in “describing” a protagonist, I would also like to comment on the characteristic manner in which Thomas employs this device. The trope partakes of his tendency to fall back on a settled stock of motifs, phrasings, metaphors and equivalences – a strategy which may well be the reason why Ian Hamilton criticizes the poet’s style as “repetitious,” and a (re)writing of “the same poem over again, several times.” I have already pointed out the consistency which is prominent in Thomas’s construction of his settings. One of their most striking and most persistent traits is the heavy dependence on pejorative motifs and epithets characterising the world as unfriendly. We remember his poetic spaces as “gaunt” (“Evans” CP 74, “The Belfry” CP 168), “grey” (“The Country Clergy” CP 82, “Country Cures” CP 124, “A Welsh Testament” CP 117), or “hard” (“Death of a Peasant” CP 34, “Too Late” CP 108, “He” CP 224). One should note here, however, that such uniformity is not limited to a particular (type of) protagonist, but applies to all equally. For a farmer, wringing life in struggle against “the wild moor’s / [c]onstant aggression” (“Green Categories” CP 77) is “uneasy” (“The Labourer” CP 39). The Wales of prince Glyndŵr is a comparably “grim world” of “winter” and “grey stones / Of Powys of the broken hills,” as the hero is waiting for “the new spring so long delayed” (“The Tree. Owain Glyn Dŵr Speaks” CP 33). In “Kierkegaard” (CP 162), the “acres” are – somewhat surprising in a text on a philosopher – metaphorised into a Danish Golgotha (“Crucifix upon a hill / In Jutland”). Finally, the universe of “Sailor Poet” (CP 80) is a realm of storm with “turbulent acres” to be crossed, and for him

7 A variant of this strategy, which consists in reducing the value of descriptive minutiae, comes to sight in those poems which inscribe the protagonist in his rural surroundings, and where a major role in grounding the experience in circumstantial detail is thus played by the world model – such as poems delineating inhabitants of the rural corners of Wales. There, too, as we could see in the preceding chapter (“On Nature”), metaphor becomes the dominant modus operandi, challenging an easy assumption that those texts are set in specific locations. Accordingly, in some poems, the landscape becomes overtly spiritual: it is the “pain’s landscape” (“Tenancies” CP 200), with “The Parish” full of “houses on the main road / To God” (CP 101).
9 Similarly, Kierkegaard is “toiling” in “A Grave Unvisited” (CP 183).
... so to have written
Even in smoke on such fierce skies,
Or to have brought one poem safely to harbour
From such horizons is not now to be scorned.

The contrasting of signs of danger in that last poem (including “fierce skies” and “smoke” which ring of thunder and, for a priest-poet, also possibly of Yahweh-the sky god’s bolts) with “safety” and “harbour” accentuates the peril inherent in the enterprise, as well as the achievement in overcoming the setbacks. Such an achievement turns out to be formidable enough “not now to be scorned.” As can be seen in this brief overview, while Thomas’s poetic worlds may offer some variation contingent upon the environment typical to each profession, they are all built in ways that aim to convey the hardship, toil and effort intrinsic to performing one’s life role.

Systemic homogeneity of the world has consequences on the plane of character delineation. For instance, owing to the frequent rapport between the earth and sea in Thomas’s poetic “sketching” of the fields, the farmer becomes enlisted amongst (metaphorical) sailors. Metaphor also forges similar identification for poets, writers, thinkers, warriors, and so on. Amongst examples at hand, one could cite “The Face” (CP 178) where “the farm, / Anchored in its grass harbour” turns into a ship for its owner to steer. As well, one could bring up the depictions of the protagonist(s) as “[c]astaways on a sea / Of grass” (“Those Others” CP 111), as “marooned there / On the bare island of himself” (“The Figure” CP 148), or as “stranded upon the vast / And lonely shore of his bleak bed” (“Evans” CP 74). In “Monet: Portrait of Madame Gaudibert” (CP 366), the protagonist’s “husband / . . . knowledgeable about ships, / knew how to salvage / the ship-wrecked painter,” for “Monet . . . paddled himself / on with strokes not / of an oar but / of a fast-dipping brush.” A similar fate of a wrecked sailor is shared by the female addressee in “Seventieth Birthday” (CP 384):

10 For more on Thomas’s tendency to equate the sea and land, see my discussion of his metaphorical treatment of the elements in the preceding chapter (“On Nature” 73).
11 In “Over Seventy Thousand Fathoms,” Tony Brown has directed our attention to the sea’s centrality for Thomas, including its personal resonances, and its appearance in connection with the themes of “endurance, resilience, the struggle for faith and authenticity of being” (168).
You are drifting away from
me on the whitening current of your hair.
I lean far out from the bone’s bough,
knowing the hand I extend
can save nothing of you but your love.

Here is also “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” (CP 471), where the woman poet is spoken of as follows:

. . . You have seen
her face, figure-head of a ship
outward bound? But she was not
alone; a trinity of persons
saw to it she kept on course
like one apprenticed since early
days to the difficulty of navigation
in rough seas. She described her turbulence
to her confessor, who was the more
astonished at the fathoms
of anguish over which she had
attained to the calmness of her harbours.

With its “rough seas,” “turbulence,” and “fathoms,” this fragment summons up an atmosphere of dangerousness (also “anguish”), and puts it in relief by contrasting it with the “calmness of her harbours.” In this respect, the poem reminds us strongly of “Farm Wife” (CP 94) and particularly of “Sailor Poet” (CP 80). It is, however, also worth mentioning in that it offers a variant of the metaphor in question, namely an equivalence which unites man and ship. In “Schoonermen” (CP 179) too, the same variant applies in “[m]emory aches / In the bones’ rigging” and “[t]he Welsh accent thick in their sails.” “What they could do to anchor him . . . they have done,” the speaker ruminates on Kierkegaard in “A Grave Unvisited” (CP 183).

Other major metaphors in Thomas’s verse include the one bespeaking man’s bond with the earth and the consanguineous equivalence between man and the tree rooted in that earth. These drive the “portrait” of a man marked by “gnarled thighs” (“Portrait” CP 112), or hands “[v]eined like a leaf,” “[w]rinkled and gnarled” (“A Labourer” CP 2), with the “skull [which] is of bark” (“Portraits” NTF 80). The

Popularity of the man-tree metaphor with Thomas has been noticed by Westover, who relates it with the poet’s “searching for permanence” and his need for a sense of belonging, a “react[ion] to the recent uprooting he himself experienced in Hanmer” (Stylistic Biography 44-45).
arboreal or earthy nature of the protagonist provides the basis for “Man and Tree” (CP 7); it also constitutes a salient element of such poems as “Guests,” “A Welshman to any Tourist,” or “Soil”:

As though a trumpet were blown
I was immediately aware
of her presence: a weeping willow
uprooted, a girl with hair
pouring

(“Guests” NTF 73)

We’ve nothing vast to offer you, no deserts
Except the waste of thought
Forming from mind erosion;

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

The hills are fine, of course,
Bearded with water to suggest age

(“A Welshman to any Tourist” CP 65)

His gaze is 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” AL 28)

It is perhaps easier to understand this triple interconnection in light of “The Mistress” (CP 9), which makes man similar to a tree by positing both as the progeny of Mother Earth:

See how earth claims him as he passes by,
Drawing him reluctant to her ample breast.
But why, when she suckled him, raised him high
In sun and shower, why did she dress
Green sap with sinew, fibre with thigh and thew?
Why has she thrust up through the hollow eye
Her tendril longing for the sky's far blue?
This metaphor is at times stretched to encompass a family tree, or even a nation tree, as happens with “the proud tree / Of blood and birth” in “Welsh History” (CP 36). In “The Tree. Owain Glyn Dŵr Speaks” (CP 32-33), in turn, the “green thought” which “grew to a great tree / In the full spring time of the year” stands for Glyndŵr’s rising against the English, and the “spring” announces the time of Wales’ military and political rebirth, an era of living strength and independence (as the “tribes rallied to its green / Banner waving in the wind; / Its roots were nourished with their blood”).

Thomas’s poetic afflatus works strongly under the influence of his fascination with the winged creatures of the skies, perceivable also in his poetic output dealing with man.13 “The Evacuee” (CP 26), for instance, resembles “a shy bird in the nest,” while William Morgan of “Llanrhaeadr ym Mochnant” (CP 192) is marked by “the hair’s feathers / Spilled on” his brow. As Dafydd convincingly argues, sometimes such an “ornithological pattern of analogy” underlines the fragility and gracefulness of a woman (“Women” 120). Most of the time, however, as in “The Old Language” and “Lament for Prytherch,” a bird signals the coming of spring – which in turn links inexorably with the imagery of the tree, and which evokes lifefulness, rejuvenation, and revival:

You are old now; time’s geometry
Upon your face by which we tell
Your sum of years has with sharp care
Conspired and crossed your brow with grief.
Your heart that is dry as a dead leaf
Undone by frost’s cruel chemistry
Clings in vain to the bare bough
Where once in April a bird sang.

(“Lament for Prytherch” CP 58)

England, what have you done to make the speech
My fathers used a stranger at my lips,

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

Moreover, avian motifs for Thomas also possess overtones of resurrection, as he observes that “birds are part of the wonder of April, causing us to ponder deeply their miraculous lives” (ML 40). The bird often heralds a world tided by god(s), the potent universe of myth-come-alive.\textsuperscript{14} A songbird communicates the \textit{sacrum}, preaching God’s communiqué inscribed in the miracle of Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection. This is how, for instance, “The Message” (CP 449) begins:

\begin{quote}
A message from God 
delivered by a bird 
at my window, offering friendship. 
Listen. Such language!
\end{quote}

By the same token, its purpose is above all the one of communication; hence, the protagonist of “Man and Tree” (CP 7) has a “bird-like \textit{tongue}” [emphasis mine].

The bird imagery also affords the opposite angle, pointing to our incapacity for expressing things. In “The Observer” (CP 185), a bird in captivity turns into a sign for the constraint inherent in being human (“Her tongue is a wren / Fluttering in the mouth’s cage”). Elsewhere, in “Marged” (CP 294), the female protagonist’s analogy to a hen is partly attributable to her volatility and the easiness with which she gets frightened, but it is also partly motivated by other characteristics of the genus. Firstly, poultry is associated with farming life, rendering the woman as another incarnation of Thomas’s “labourer.” Then, one remembers that hens are

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Ferber: “Because they can fly, and seem to link the sky with the earth and sea, birds also resemble gods, so the ancients often considered birds either incarnation of gods or their messengers. . . . In Christian myth it was a heavenly dove that filled Mary with the Holy Spirit” (26). Of course, Thomas followed mostly the Christian canon. Nonetheless, at times, as Dafydd notices, such an evocation of an “alternative reality,” for the poet, also involves falling back to \textit{The Mabinogi}, by way of references to the birds of Rhiannon (“Women” 122). Dafydd further elaborates: “These birds appear . . . as part of the tale of ‘Branwen Daughter of Llŷr’” (122), and become for Thomas “a symbol of [his] relationship with Wales and Welsh culture; a symbol of regeneration and repair in the face of mechanisation and Anglicization” (122), as well as “a pre-colonial ideal” (123). See also above Chapter 2 (“On Nature”) (72 n.12).
\end{footnote}
also flightless and domesticated rather than wild and free; but above all, they cannot sing: “song is denied her.”

Song carries thus associations with freedom, self-expression, and happiness – a similar range of associations to Keats’s nightingale trills. Even if the motif is employed through negation, as in the above two cases, it is still in relation to communication, attesting to another of the bird’s symbolic implications in Thomas’s oeuvre, namely that of a poet.15 Avian imagery would therefore suggest the granting of a poetic role to the bird-like protagonist.16 This casts some illuminating light on Thomas’s identifications of Welshmen with birds: they seem to allude to the long poetic tradition of Wales, a country famous for bards and sophisticated versification systems.17

In the above overview, I have traced several types of iterative imagery relating to birds, earth, tree, toil, and the sea, all of which crop up again and again in Thomas’s depictions of man. To take one final example, I could also mention the recurrent motifs of warring in those depictions. It is not only Glyndŵr or other national heroes whose “[s]words and spears accused the sky” (“The Rising of Glyndwr” [sic] CP 6). Thomas’s poetry abounds in delineations of the country smallholders battling against invasions of tourists, or against assaults of the merciless natural world. The poet tells us of “enemy” and “green blades” that were “brandished” in “To the Farmer” (CP 97), and describes the field-conquering man in “Cynddylan on a Tractor” as a “knight at arms” (CP 30); the protagonist of “A Peasant” (CP 4), in turn, is “an impregnable fortress” and “a winner of wars,” one

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15 This is of course a patent inheritance of the Romantic tradition. Although the identification of birdsong with poetry goes as far back as antiquity and Aristophanes, Callimachus or Virgil, and has always been present in British poetry (including for instance Shakespeare, Andrew Marvell or Milton), it became popularised in Romanticism, owing hugely to Keats’s “Ode to the Nightingale.” For a more detailed outline of the analogy in the nineteenth-century and before, see Frank Doggett “Romanticism’s Singing Bird.”

16 Cf. the marriage of poetry to singing and music in “No” (CP 184), “Ann Griffith” [sic] (CP 281), and “Wallace Stevens” (CP 135).

17 The association of Welshness with poetry and song probably lies at the roots of the title of Welsh Airs, under which a collection of Thomas’s poems about Wales was published in 1987. Cf. M. Wynn Thomas (“Keeping His Pen Clean” 76). Thomas’s Welsh protagonists are frequently personages within the poetic profession, beginning with Taliesin, through Twm o’r Nant (Thomas Edwards) or Ann Griffiths, up to Alun Lewis – see, for instance, “Alun Lewis” (AL 25), “Lines for Taliesin” (UP 29), and “A Welsh Ballad Singer” (UP 42).
who “[a]gainst siege of rain and the wind’s attrition, / Preserves his stock.” A closer glance, however, reveals that conflict in Thomas’s poetic universe also becomes the lot of thinkers (see, for instance, “The press sharpened / Its rapier; wounded he crawled” in “Kierkegaard” CP 162); politicians-cum-writers (“Blood and iron,” “wounds” and “doves on an errand / Of peace-making” in a poem on Saunders Lewis entitled “The Patriot” CP 150); and poets (see “the dark, inscrutable glasses, / His first defence against a material world” in “Memories of Yeats Whilst Travelling to Holyhead” CP 10).¹⁸ Neither is the marital life free from this quality: “You have your battle, / too,” observes the speaker in “Marriage” (CP 300).

Considering the nation’s history and the fame accorded to warriors in Celtic bardic tradition, the presentation of the Welsh in the context of fighting is perhaps understandable. So is the terminology of conflict between the married couple, involved – we might suppose – in a power struggle or in a battle of the sexes.¹⁹ We might also accept this type of imagery in poems on farmers, given their delineation of the world as a wild domain where the elements run rampant, and which thus demands taming and conquering. The marshalling of the imagery of arms, the seeping of blood-related words into the texts on poets and thinkers, arrests attention, however, as it is not easily explained by historical or biographical context. Moreover, since warring appears with such consistency in so many poems, it no longer seems circumstance-dependent or character-motivated but rather impresses us as defining the human condition in general.²⁰

While we could continue to enumerate the endlessly similar imagery percolating throughout Thomas’s poetic dealings with man, the full list would far exceed the needs and scope of this chapter.²¹ For our immediate purpose it is more important to concentrate on the very strategy of repetition, for at its core it seems

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¹⁸ Cf. “A wearer / of dark glasses to protect / you against his cleverness’s / glare” (“Portraits” NTF 80).

¹⁹ Cf. Ellis’s conviction that “[a] real bone of contention exists at the heart of the relationship” between Thomas and his wife as depicted in his verse (24-25).

²⁰ Cf. Thomas’s comment “Who is wounded, and am I not wounded? For I bear in my body the marks of this battle” (CWS 22).

²¹ Other popular motifs and metaphors include thirst and cracked lips; difficulty in speaking, or speechlessness; desert; fountain and water; or phlegm. Attention-grabbing is also the motif of “balancing” over an abyss, and the related metaphor of an acrobat in poems such as “Homage to Wallace Stevens” (NTF 62), or “Homage to Paul Klee” (NTF 75).
to defy the expectations of individualized characters, thus reinforcing the deconcretising function of metaphor. Despite his claim to be writing about Iago Prytherch, Kierkegaard, Stevens, or Rhodri, Thomas’s repetitive poetic lays bare the uniformity of his poetic perception, a perception of people in terms of their similarity to others. Of course, it is not just that Thomas has only one and the same protagonist in mind; my point is rather that, even if his characters possess unique personalities, these are often counterpoised by a poetic which undermines such particularising. For all the variety of his protagonists, the poet seems at a deeper level to focus on what they possess in common.

One could point out here that many of Thomas’s poems have titles suggesting generality – titles parading indefinite articles such as in “A Peasant” (CP 4) or “Death of a Poet” (CP 84), or titles using the definite article as a class-denoting indicator, as can be seen in “The Country Clergy” (CP 82). This trait is important in that it flags an interest in a protagonist as belonging to a group. What forms the linchpin here is a man’s role rather than a name-related individuality.22

Indeed, the moniker of Iago Prytherch, appearing in a large number of works from Stones of the Field to Not that He Brought Flowers, is known to be Thomas’s invention as an umbrella-appellation for “an English-speaking hill-farmer” in Wales, a figure which “merges with other, often unnamed men of the soil and mixes [into] an amalgam of laborers and poor farmers” (Stevenson 81).23 According to Ward, “the remarkable thing about Prytherch is that he is so elusive . . . the insertion of the name does not make what is then said differ in any material way from what is said of other, unnamed farmers” (23).24 Ward’s

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22 One could also note here that the very use of terms such as “peasant” or “labourer,” instead of the modern-day common term “farmer,” testifies to a disengagement from an observation of the contemporary reality, signalling the protagonist’s role as an obsolete ideal, a concept rather than a living man. Cf. Thomas’s comments on Prytherch and other named or anonymous figures sharing the hard rural lifestyle – “What have the centuries done / To change him?” and “He has been here since the life began” – from “The Labourer” (CP 39). In “The Gap in the Hedge” (CP 29), in turn, Thomas actually suggests the protagonist’s imaginary nature, his being a work of art, just a “likeness that the twigs drew / With bold pencilling upon that bare / Piece of the sky.”

23 Stevenson explains the name as consisting of the common Welsh version of James and a contraction of ap Rhydderch, or the Welsh for “son of Rhytherch” (81).

24 At a closer glance, Thomas’s poems often exhibit a striking lack of detail while supposedly “describing” a person. This concerns even those texts which endow their protagonists with names (e.g. Davies, Evans, Prytherch). The rhetorical questions in “A Labourer” – “Who can tell his
observations on Prytherch resemble Tony Brown’s remarks on Thomas’s presentation of the female in “Touching” (CP 195), where “the poet generalizes from the outset: the woman becomes, somewhat easily, a representative of her sex” (“Poems to Wife” 140). These comments touch upon Thomas’s propensity to endow his protagonists with the synecdochic character of an exemplar; all women in his poetry seem to turn out similar to other women, all field labourers to other field labourers, all poets to other poets, and so on. Moreover, there is a unifying comparability between them all. Of such, “Bent” (CP 389) provides a good example. There, through repetition, parallelism and enumeration, an inventory of suggested vocations are rendered as one, for they all share the same unescapable, humanity-defining fate of being affected by the earthly pull:

Heads bowed  
over the entrails,  
over the manuscript, the  
block, over the rows  
of swedes

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

Two million years  
in straightening them  
out, and they are still bent  
over the charts, the instruments,  
the drawing board

As we have seen, Thomas often considers people in terms of their “professions” (for lack of a better word), but set against the context of “Bent,” all these roles manifest themselves simply as representative of diverse aspects of human existence.

The types of metaphorical repertories used by Thomas also play a part in his universalisation of the human subject, rooted as they often are in the Scriptures. For in view of this poetry’s “entangle[ment] with the mysteries of man’s origins and finalities,” inherent in the poet’s obsession with the earth “out of which man is fashioned and to which his blood will ultimately return” (Castay 107), it becomes

years . . . ?,” “Who can read the look . . . ?” – seem even to negate any possibility of succeeding at a description: what the reader is left with is the mention of several body parts which are utterly without expression and, as such, without any sign of individuality.
obvious that this priest-poet reaches back to Genesis’ exposition of Creation. In other words, the metaphors and motifs pertaining to the man-tree as stemming from the life-giving earth find their source in the proposition that “the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground” (Genesis 2:7). Similarly, the sweat and toil marring man’s relationship with nature, as framed in the Thomasian picture of the human reality, are reminiscent of another fragment of this Book:

Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (Genesis 3:17-3:19)

This is to say, Thomas’s metaphor points indirectly to the status of his protagonist as a poetic incarnation of (a son of) Adam, and hence, as the poet himself puts it, “your prototype” and an “ordinary man” (“A Peasant” CP 4). The Bible also seems to offer Thomas a purchase on the imagery of war as another determinant of life. Given the poet’s tenacious liking for the story of Jacob wrestling with God’s angel in the desert, unveiled in allusions and references permeating his entire oeuvre, it is possible to regard the motifs of warring vis-à-vis the associated notion of the Christian community as the children of Israel, the eternal fighters. Although not scriptural, the protagonist’s metaphorical identification with a sailor or ship – in “Richard Hughes” (UP 95), “Sailor Poet” (CP 80), “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” (CP 470-75), or “The Face” (CP 178), for instance – perpetuates the universalising strain because it is indebted to the traditional allegory of life as a sea voyage. Thomas’s technique seems thus to have something in common with the Biblical convention of the parable, which decides – by way of analogy – upon the text’s character as an “illustration of certain general laws affecting human life” [translation mine] (“Parabola,” def.). Granted the protagonists’ speaking for the whole of humanity, one feels that they are all metaphorical constructs in

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25 See also “This One,” limning a farmer-figure “[p]loughing under the tall boughs / Of the tree of the knowledge of / Good and evil” (CP 210).
26 For more on Thomas and Genesis 32:28, see Chapter 1 “Faith and Experience” (56 and passim).
27 For more on this allegory, see Phillip Edwards Sea-Mark, Rahner (328-386) or George P. Landow Images of Crisis.
themselves, metaphors suggestive of what it means to be a man, and proposing that it is *like* being, for instance, a labourer, a sailor, or a warrior.

In the present analysis, I have so far looked at Thomas’s repertory of motif and metaphor, examining its realisations across his oeuvre and pointing to their generalising outcomes. In doing this I have also highlighted how his poems co-operate with one-another, with homogenising effects. It is my aim now to look at certain associated features of this strategy. Thomas’s iterative drive is important not only because of its uniformity-imposing value. One needs to add here that a motif’s and metaphor’s semantic potential is substantially enriched through the variety of contexts in which they work. This technique affords thus a forceful enhancement of their poeticity as well as their expansion into what might be called complex metaphorical themes, of which man’s consanguinity with the tree and the earth provide two intertwined examples.

What is more, because the shape of a given motif in one text has a bearing on the way we see it shape up in another, it is often enough for a single word to materialise to be recognised as a part of the whole phrase, metaphor, or equivalence to which it contributed elsewhere. To put this another way, on account of the oeuvre’s systemic consistency we tend to read one poem with the context of another at the back of our minds, and to supply the “lacking” information, as it were. Thus we can say that a sign in Thomas’s verse assumes at times the power of a quasi-minus-device, indicating an omitted albeit expected element. A case in point is the simile “eyes . . . colourless as rain,” which can be found in “Man and Tree” (CP 7), and which is re-cast in “The Face” (CP 178) as “eye . . . that has the rain’s / Colourlessness.” It echoes again in the correlation between rain and the epithet “colourless,” a conjunction which resurfaces in “Peasant Girl Weeping” (UP 38). Because of all these similarities in expression, we instantly recall and inscribe

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28 Thomas’s affinity with Yeats with respect to this poetic technique has already become a truisms, although the nuances of its deployment in Thomas's poetics specifically has escaped critical attention so far. A useful recent account of the scholarly literature on this topic can be found in Damian Walford Davies’s “Yeats Said That” (5).
29 I’m referring here to Lotman’s conception of “minus-prijom” (translated by Vroon as “minus-function”) developed in Structure (139, 183).
the comparison to rain when the phrase “colourless eyes” turns up in “A Labourer” (CP 2).

Similarly, we recognise the single word “tree” as a constituent of the metaphorical theme of man’s origins in the soil, which we recall in its entirety the moment we see this sign in a text. Here we touch upon another method of increasing poetic potency typical of Thomas’s style: he invests the metaphor with the function of a sign, or, to put it differently, he furnishes even single motifs with the capacity of metaphor.

Having spotlighted the accumulative character of Thomas’s metaphors, I also want to say a few words about their mutual relationships, for the simple reason that they not only migrate across various texts, but also strikingly combine with one another. In Thomas, countless metaphorical motifs seem tied to a range of other equivalences, metaphors, and motifs, across an ever-broadening array of texts, leading to a process of semantic growth through continuing metaphorisation – a multiplication (to resort to a mathematical analogy) by other metaphors. Admittedly, Thomas’s texts also contain unlinked, independent tropes, but more often than not they show a predilection for joining up into what can be called metaphorical chains.

An example can be found even in the multisided metaphorical unification of the protagonists’ “occupations.” Thomas’s poetic encounters with people often suggest or even directly spell out a coalescence of a given type of protagonist with other types. Drawing perhaps on the duty of priests to convey the Word, as well as his own personal experience, he juxtaposes the ministering and writing capacities in “The Country Clergy” (CP 82) while in “Saunders Lewis” (CP 466), the Welsh writer-cum-political activist is an “ascetic” monk-like being, “himself / His hermitage.” Correspondence of tasks also unites Lewis and other writers, on the one hand, and the farmer, on the other. Their affinity transpires, for instance, from the metaphor of poetry-plant marking “A Lecturer” (CP 138) or “Poetry for Supper” (CP 86). In this last poem, poetry is considered as “natural / As the small tuber that feeds on muck / And grows slowly from obtuse soil,” as well as “sprawl[ing], / Limp as bindweed”. Working with such poetry demands “the long toil” not unlike that of the labourer’s in the field, making the poet “sweat / And rhyme [his] guts tout.”
More direct is the description of the Danish philosopher as a “labourer” on a “hill in Jutland” in “Kierkegaard” (CP 162). This is also accompanied by an intimation of his similarity to a hermit, in the motif of “the monastery of his chaste thought.” In turn, the phrase “I husbanded the rippling meadow / Of her body” (“Acting” CP 218) is striking with its evocation of two senses of the word “husband”: as a noun referring to a marital status and as a verb denoting the act of tilling the soil. The metaphor of love as plant to be cultivated comes up in “The Mill” (CP 144-45). As we proceed with this overview, we quickly get an impression that in Thomas’s oeuvre, a philosopher is a farmer, a poet is a farmer, a farmer is a poet, a farmer is a Welshman, a Welshman is a farmer but also a poet, the priest is a poet, a poet is a priest, a priest is a farmer tending his sheep, and so on and so on.

Let us now have a brief look at some other metaphorical correlations. “Man and Tree” (CP 7) is a good starting point for appraising the complexity of Thomas’s technique:

Study this man; he is older than the tree

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

Notice his mouth and the dry, bird-like tongue,
That flutters and fails at the cracked door of his lips.
Dumb now and sapless? Yet this man can teach,
Even as an oak tree when its leaves are shed,
More in old silence than in youthful song.

In this poem, “teaching” appears in connection to singing (even if the relation is here not straightforward but based on a paradox), and both motifs come together with the one of man’s “cracked . . . lips.” The phrase is tied to telling “stories” in “Walter Llywarch” (CP 98); it also finds an echo in “No” (CP 184), a poem which tells us about a sick “man [who] can sing” and about “the nurses [who] wiped off / The poetry from his cracked lips.”

The motif of cracked lips – as “Man and Tree” suggests, by coupling it with “dry . . . tongue” – constitutes a symptom-based statement of parchedness and dehydration, evocative of thirst. Thirst, in turn, is frequently endowed by Thomas
with religious connotations, voicing a spiritual longing for God.\textsuperscript{30} It is, for instance, juxtaposed with the motif of “the living water” (an allusion to John 7:38) in “The Fisherman” (CP 190), and “Ffynon Fair (St Mary’s Well)” (CP 292) speaks of “the pure spirit . . . giving itself up / to the thirsty.”

Considering Thomas’s liking for continuing metaphorisation, the motif of a ladder appearing across several poems, including “Poetry for Supper” (CP 86) or “The greatest language . . .” (R 70), can be understood as an autothematic hint concerning the poet’s technique. In the light of our analysis it can be said that his metaphor often follows a stair-like model, as illustrated below but building on the above examples:

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metaphor of spiritual longing for God
↑
metaphor of thirst
↑
metaphor of cracked lips
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Just as the rungs of Jacob’s ladder lead towards the heavenly realm, the Thomasian hierarchy of metaphors frequently goes from descriptive concrete to the abstract, from the material to the spiritual, from things that can be experienced physically to something that escapes physical experience. The poet endows a given data with the function of metaphor relating to internal life, often transposing it in the process onto the plane of man’s relationship with the \textit{sacrum}.

The resultant generalising implications not only contribute to an underlying perception of the protagonists as similar, but also allow us to understand the origins of this similarity, locating its foundations in an avid interest in humanity and our shared existential enigmas. It is the ontological status of the protagonist as a man which seems most to fascinate the poet. The author of “Man and Tree” pretends to rely on circumstantial, biographical, or descriptive detail, none of

\textsuperscript{30} Cf. Tony Brown’s remark that “the image of the capacity to use language, and its association with the purity and energy of pure, flowing water, is a frequent metaphor in Thomas’s early work for imaginative, even spiritual vitality” (“Identity and Gender” 230). Thomas can be seen here in the context of what Countryman says in \textit{Poetic Imagination} about the traditional representation of God’s grace as a fountain, and about the absence of God as rendering “the experience of faith dry” (63). A background for this metaphorical theme can be found in John 4:10-4:15, and the Psalms 22, 36 and 63.
which functions any longer as such. Rather, subjected to metaphor, the detail
grows out of the situation in which it is rooted, leaving it for the realms of poetic
invention and personal subjective interpretation – which, for this poet, tends to be
generalising reflection.\textsuperscript{31} Thomas’s strategies in speaking of man establish his
poems yet again as discursive utterances in which direct experiential data become a
pretext for a deepened rumination on the human condition.

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In the first part of this chapter I discussed Thomas’s handling of
circumstantial detail and his leaning towards generalisation when dealing with
people in verse. A poem, however, is a structural entity of many elements shaped by
all manner of heterogeneous tendencies. Many of these emerge in mutual tension,
and it is to this that a literary work owes its dynamics.\textsuperscript{32} The question thus appears
now of any elements in the examined texts which might contradict generalisation.
More specifically, is there in Thomas’s writing a perceptible influence from
occasional poetry? A poem which originates in an encounter raises expectations of
kinship with those traditions and the associated genre or sub-generic conventions.
With a view to addressing this issue, the discussion that follows will centre on
Thomas’s poems of encounter with respect to genology.\textsuperscript{33}

To engage in a comprehensive genological investigation of Thomas’s poetry
on man would require a more extensive research than is possible in this chapter,
which is necessarily restricted to brief approximate observations. Here I can only

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\textsuperscript{31} Jason Walford Davies thus recollects Thomas’s comments on the translation of a poem by
Caedfryn that the poet carried out: “‘In Caedfryn’s three short stanzas what you have is not a
particular landscape, but the human condition.’ He went on to say that this is an ‘abstracting’
tendency that has been consistent in Welsh verse since the period of Llywarch Hen, and that it had
long become true of his own poetry’s dealings with landscape and objective life” (89).

\textsuperscript{32} The theory of the dynamic nature of a literary artifact has been developed by Yuri Tynianov in
\textit{Problem of Verse Language}. Eikhenbaum also agrees: “In art, there is no simple, peaceful harmony
of elements, a work of art is a complex unit. It is always a result of the struggle of the elements,
always a compromise” (qtd. in Karcz 79).

\textsuperscript{33} The term “genology” was coined in 1930s by Paul Van Tieghem to refer to the aspect of poetics
which deals with literary genres.
signal possible directions for further study.\textsuperscript{34} When trying to assess the genre conventions in this verse, one is also hindered by the scarcity of suitable scholarly material against which such an assessment might be carried out. Regrettably, but perhaps unavoidably, not all genres in the history of literary activity on the British Isles boast exhaustive monographic studies. Moreover, older studies frequently represent critical procedures based on classification, recognized by contemporary genre theory as inadequate.\textsuperscript{35} Literary convention is not understood here as a method of freezing the creative impulse into imitative, ready-made, mass-produced forms. As David Duff puts it: “For the artist, the encounter with genre is a moment of differentiation as well as assimilation. Generic codes are both invoked and modified in the act of writing, and it is through contact with the generic that individual identity is established” (Romanticism viii). The present explorations take as their basis the diachronic notion of genre as a set of features or conventions that undergo unceasing evolution owing to its coexistence, and consequent cross-fertilisation with other conventions within literary hierarchies of consecutive literary periods.\textsuperscript{36} The assumption of such a theoretical perspective entails an understanding of literary work as marked by selected (rather than a full range of) characteristics that can be traced to a given genre; moreover, their actualisation in the text does not preclude a coterminous presence of discordant qualities. In other words, a single text may – and usually does – disclose several generic affiliations simultaneously (Duff Romanticism 20). Hence, rather than defining a given text as belonging to a particular genre, I speak of an appearance, in that text, of genre or other conventions (stanzaic, versification, metrical and so on). Accordingly, my analysis is organised not into lists of poems as illustrative of discrete genres, but into a chain of interlinked observations of diverse traits which make this poetry intersect with a number of traditions, many of them at the same time.

\textsuperscript{34} Regrettably, considerations of the influence of Welsh literature conventions will be unavoidably superficial for the simple reason that the authoress of the present thesis does not possess the command of the Welsh language.

\textsuperscript{35} For more on this issue, see for instance Duff “Introduction” (Modern Genre Theory esp. 18).

\textsuperscript{36} Major proponents of this notion include Ireneusz Opacki, Duff and Ralph Cohen. See e.g. Opacki “Royal Genres,” Duff Romanticism (19-20, and passim), and Cohen “History and Genre.”
When charting a text’s rootedness in situational context, one might as well start from the beginning, that is, from the title, which often announces the motivating occasion. Among others, Thomas’s literary scope comprises poems written for such events as “Seventieth Birthday” (CP 384), an “Anniversary” (CP 103), or the “Golden Wedding” (R 40). Nonetheless, these poems’ reliance on metaphor ensures a substantial abstract quality to what mainly turns out to be reflection (repeatedly touching on love versus the flow of time). In these cases, the title will ordinarily remain the sole means of anchoring the utterance in a given occurrence.

Different in that respect is “July 5 1940” (UP 23):

Nought that I would give today [a]  
Would half compare [b]  
With the long-treasured riches that somewhere [b]  
In the deep heart are stored. [c]  
Cloud and the moon and mist and the whole [d]  
Hoard of frail, white-bubbling stars, [e]  
And the cool blessing, [f]  
Like moth or wind caressing, [f]  
Of the fair, fresh rain-dipped flowers; [g]  
And all the spells of the sea, and the new green [h]  
Of moss and fern and bracken [i]  
Before their youth is stricken; [i]  
The thoughts of the trees at eventide, the hush [j]  
In the dark corn at morning, [k]  
And the wish [j]  
In your own heart still but dawning – [k]  
All of these, [l]  
A soft weight on your hands, [m]  
I would give now; [n]  
And lastly myself made clean [o]  
And white as the wave-washed sand, [m]  
If I knew how. [n]

Here, the date informs us that the text is devoted to the poet’s marriage to Elsi. As Byron Rogers points out, the strategy of enumerating gifts is a borrowing from Edward Thomas’s “And You, Helen” (49-50). In “July 5 1940,” the “catalogue” is comprised of weather phenomena, celestial bodies and other elements of the natural world. These range from cloud, mist, wind, and rain, through the sea and the sand, up to flora, represented by moss, fern, bracken, trees, corn, and flowers.
Moreover, these last are compared to the moth, resulting in an indirect enlisting of the realm of fauna. The length of this list is not without significance, for it seems to encompass the entire Universe. This is an obviously emphatic method, for the simple reason that it grants the marriage a cosmic dimension, thus awarding it with enormous significance. Furthermore, although the poem is written in stichic free verse, it not only features a complex set of rhymes (vanishing and resurfacing intermittently), but also it is replete with alliteration and consonance, the apotheosis of which can be found in “whole hoard,” “white as the wave-washed sand,” “fair, fresh rain-dipped flowers,” or “all the spells of the sea.” The richness in epithet and its compound, hyphenated character (“fair, fresh rain-dipped,” “long-treasured,” or “frail, white-bubbling”) are eye-catching. Given the poem’s occasion, it is reasonable to conclude that the above techniques are functional in delivering an appropriately high and formal style, thereby demonstrating the work’s indebtedness to the epitalamium, one of the conventions of occasional poetry.

A similar predilection for euphony empowers other poetic works, and is integral, for instance, to “Out of the Hills,” “Ire,” or “The Welsh Hill Country:”

Dreams clustering thick on his sallow skull,
Dark as curls, he comes, ambling with his cattle
(“Out of the Hills” CP 1)

. . . Is this the way
You welcome your man from his long mowing
Of the harsh, unmannerly, mountain hay?
(“Ire” SF 40)

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37 In this respect, one could add, the poem seems actually closer to Michael Drayton’s “To the New Yeere” (59-61) than to Edward Thomas.

38 Interestingly, sound orchestration in this poetry often spans consecutive lines, and is governed by syntax rather than lineation – “Enigma” (SYT 68) is one of the poems providing an example of this, with the phrase “notices only the weeds’ way / Of wrestling” moving across two lines. See also “sharp care / Conspired and crossed your brow” or “[u]ndone by frost’s cruel chemistry / Clings in vain,” both from “Lament for Prytherch” (CP 58). This could perhaps suggest some inheritance from the old alliterative poetry.
Too far for you to see
The fluke and the foot-rot and the fat maggot

(“The Welsh Hill Country” CP 22)

This sound ordering is often designed to enhance semantic equivalence and put metaphor in the spotlight – as happens with “dress . . . sap with sinew,” “thigh and thew,” “fibre” and “thigh,” or “flight and freedom” in “The Mistress” (CP 9):

See how earth claims him as he passes by, [a]
Drawing him reluctant to her ample breast. [b]
But why, when she suckled him, raised him high [a]
In sun and shower, why did she dress [b]
Green sap with sinew, fibre with thigh and thew? [c]
Why has she thrust up through the hollow eye [a]
Her tendril longing for the sky’s far blue? [c]
How could she teach him intricate weaving [d]
Of wind and air with the frail bones, craving [d]
For flight and freedom, and suddenly sunder [e]
Dreamer from dream in a mute surrender? [e]

These phonological agreements become entangled with an intricate rhyming pattern, which incorporates internal rhymes (“sinew”-“thew,” “high”-“why”-“thigh,” “why”-“eye”-“sky’s”). Against its backdrop, the arrangement of the final four lines into two couplets underlines their concluding role, re-articulating the more sinister aspect of man’s double-sided relation with Mother-Earth/the earth of the grave.

Even more elaborate is the rhyming in “Affinity” (CP 8), “A Priest to His People” (CP 13), “Country Child” (CP 5), or “A Peasant:”

Iago Prytherch his name, though, be it allowed, [a]
Just an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills, [b]
Who pens a few sheep in a gap of cloud. [a]
Docking mangels, chipping the green skin [c]
From the yellow bones with a half-witted grin [c]
Of satisfaction, or churning the crude earth [d]
To a stiff sea of clouds that glint in the wind – [e]
So are his days spent, his spittled mirth [d]
Rarer than the sun that cracks the cheeks [f]
Of the gaunt sky perhaps once in a week. [f]
And then at night see him fixed in his chair [g]
Motionless, except when he leans to gob in the fire. [g]
There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind. [h]
His clothes, sour with years of sweat
And animal contact, shock the refined,
But affected, sense with their stark naturalness.
Yet, this is your prototype, who, season by season
Against siege of rain and the wind’s attrition,
Preserves his stock, an impregnable fortress
Not to be stormed even in death’s confusion.
Remember him, then, for he, too, is a winner of wars,
Enduring like a tree under the curious stars.

(CP 4)

Certainly, simplicity of a consistent pattern brightens the perusal of some poems – just as it does with “The Gap in the Hedge” (CP 29). Most often, however, the poet seems to exploit the opportunities opened up by a monostrophic composition in order to develop elusive rhyme “schemes” which are concocted through variation and combination.39

When examining genological aspects of verse, it is also rewarding to look at prosody and stanzaic conventions. Naturally, written in the twentieth century – an era generally (though perhaps also gradually) more appreciative of free verse – Thomas’s poems do not conform to a strict metrical organisation. As a few critics have noted, the hallmarks of his style embrace instead a purposeful recourse to enjambment.40 Interestingly, however, the poet’s arrangement of phrases within the space of the line creates the impression of a mid-pause even in cases when no punctuation mark acts as a delimiter. Moreover, in many poems the halting moment tends to occur in a similar position throughout the text, falling mainly after either the fourth or the fifth syllable. By virtue of this regularity, each line emerges as divided into two parts with a quasi-caesura, with one part consisting of five syllables, and the other one often hesitating between five and four. Such is the

39 Thus, Westover observes: “Conventional (closed-form) English prosody rarely uses rhyme arbitrarily. In all of its shapes – heroic couplets, elegiac quatrains, sonnets, Spenserian stanzas et cetera – it uses rhyme in fixed patterns. Thomas’s Manafon poems, by contrast, rarely follow standard rhyme schemes. They deploy rhyme opportunistically, for specific effects” (Stylistic Biography 58).

40 In Stylistic Biography, Westover undertakes an overview of Thomas’s enjambments as one of the book’s major topics, relating this technique to the poet’s internal tension, as well as his reading of American poetry and Edward Thomas (esp. 79-108 and 115-36).
case with “Chapel Deacon” (CP 76), “The Patriot” (CP 150), “The Last of the Peasantry” (CP 66), as well as “Farm Wife”:

Hers is the clean apron, good for fire
Or lamp to embroider, as we talk slowly
In the long kitchen, while the white dough
Turns to pastry in the great oven,
Sweetly and surely as hay making
In a June meadow; hers are the hands
Humble with milking, but still now
In her wide lap as though they heard
A quiet music, hers being the voice
That coaxes time back to the shadows
In the room’s corners. O, hers is all
This strong body, the safe island
Where man may come, sons and lovers,
Daring the cold seas of her eyes.

(CP 94).

Although the pattern is not strictly adhered to, the line length, oscillating ordinarily from eight to ten syllables, hints at the affinity of such poems with the sonnet – which is confirmed by their composition in fourteen lines.41 Such heritage notwithstanding, these organisational principles can perhaps also be illumined by other literary traditions.

It seems that – as was the case with “July 5 1940” – the intricacies of versification and sound manifest purposeful, careful crafting, bringing Thomas’s writing closer to the elegance of formal, elevated style and signalling gravitation

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41 Cf. the accusation of the “[m]en of the hills, wantoners, men of Wales” of their “ignorance of rhyme and sonnet” in “A Priest to His People” (CP 13). While the English variant is not foreign to the poet, Thomas’s sonnets – including for instance “Which?” (CP 119), “Hireling” (CP 109) or “No through Road” (CP 68) – are often organised into an octave and a sestet, clearly harking back to the Petrarchan models. It seems that Thomas’s affinity with the English sonnet manifests itself most not in the stanzaic patterning, but in the approach to the volta. In Dolce Stil Nuovo, the volta – a pause or turn in the argument or mood – coincides with the transition from octave to sestet. In the English adaptation, however, it usually comes later (which is reflected in the poem’s division into three quatrains and a closing couplet). Thomas, too, shows an inclination towards making a point in the final two lines. A couplet rhyme may appear at times to enhance that; the poet is also apt to intensify metaphor or make a rhetorical address in the last sentence/line. Some examples illustrating these trends include “Acting” (CP 218), “The Country Clergy” (CP 82), or “To the Farmer” (CP 97). For more theoretical considerations, see Burt and Mikics Art of Sonnet, John Fuller Sonnet, or Michael R.G. Spiller Development of Sonnet.
towards the so-called high genres.\textsuperscript{42} If we set them alongside his penchant to turn the protagonist into a representative of the whole humanity, these techniques can be construed as contributing to the gravity of presented reflection. In other words, it can be argued that by influencing the overall tone of the poem, its phonological organisation helps impart a sense of nobility to its subject.

This supposition is supported by the strategy of idealisation, another potent ingredient in Thomas’s recipe for the construction of the protagonist. Admittedly, the poet has repeatedly been chastised for his condescending treatment of people. M. Wynn Thomas, for instance, notes “the misogyny that sometimes seems evident in Thomas’s later poetry” ("War Poet").\textsuperscript{43} In an article for BBC News Wales, Rhodri Owen recollects how “[o]n his passing [Thomas] was described as a ‘misanthrope’ by one London-based national newspaper.” Barbara Hardy is less restrained, holding the poet culpable of “disgust” (95), “scornful” antipathy towards both the English and the Welsh (94), and “uncharitable emotions in the poems with human or humane subjects” (99). As some observe, however, the critical strand in this verse is coterminous with distinctly celebratory tones.\textsuperscript{44} Thus, “Homage to Paul Klee” (NTF 75), “Homage to Wallace Stevens” (NTF 62), and similar titles suggest that laudation forms a vital component of Thomas’s literary portraiture of poets and other artists. Tony Brown’s analysis of “R.S. Thomas’s Poems to His Wife” points out that “after Elsi’s death in 1991, her husband wrote, and published, a series of poems in tribute to her which are amongst the finest, and most moving, of his whole career . . . poems of great lyrical beauty and tenderness” [emphasis mine] (151). I am going to focus on this positive current of Thomas’s depictions of people, for in my view it is this current which takes us closer to a discovery of some of his genre ancestries.

\textsuperscript{42} Westover proposes that this lineament in Thomas’s poetry may be explained by the poet’s drawing upon Welsh poetic heritage, particularly its sophisticated system of sound arrangement called cynghanedd (Stylistic Biography 50). See also Perry (Chameleon Poet 56).
\textsuperscript{43} Similarly, Hamilton avers that “there is [also] a powerful strain of misanthropy in [Thomas’s] memoirs.”
\textsuperscript{44} Geoffrey Hill, for instance, speaks of “Thomas’s idealized country-dweller” (51). See also Stevenson’s commentary on the poet’s mixed attitudes of “revulsion” and “admiration” towards the farmer (85).
Albeit perhaps not as obvious, an admiring stance is also prominent in the poet’s descriptions of the shepherding and land-tilling smallholder at work. In spite of all the exaggeration colouring these descriptions, the peasant’s closeness to the natural world and his compliance with the earth’s laws are set in a decided, positively-valued opposition to an urban, technological, and commercially-oriented attitude:

... I find
This hate’s for my own kind,
For men of the Welsh race
Who brood with dark face
Over their thin navel
To learn what to sell;

Yet not for them all either,
There are still those other
Castaways on a sea
Of grass, who 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.

("Those Others" CP 111)

Power, farmer? It was always yours.
Not the new physics’ terrible threat

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

... but an old gift
For weathering the slow recoil
Of empires with a tree’s patience,

45 Considering the type of protagonist which these poems delineate, their provenance can be located also within the convention of bucolic poetry. Indeed, it is against this tradition that Thomas’s poetry is illumined by Hill, Gifford (“Some Versions”), or Perry (Chameleon Poet 85-123).

46 According to Gifford, the counterposition of the natural and the urban forms one of the constitutive attributes of the pastoral (“Some Versions” 2). There is one reservation, as Gifford argues elsewhere, as to Thomas’s realisation of this convention: his is a “reluctant pastoral” (Pastoral 47), distinguished by a protagonist who is “half-witted animalistic . . . exaggeration in his ‘stark naturalness’” (46). The idealisation of the peasant rubs shoulders with frequent exhortations targeted at his ignorance and insensitivity to natural beauty. “There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind,” confesses the observer of “A Peasant” (CP 4). The plougher of the fields is “[g]aitered with mud,” sporting “stinking garments” and “an aimless grin” (“Affinity” CP 8), and “[t]he tale of [his] life is smirched with dung” (“The Hill Farmer Speaks” CP 31).
Rooted in the dark soil.
(“Power” CP 88)

... you read in the slow book
Of the farm, turning the field’s pages
So patiently, never tired
Of the land’s story; not just believing,
But proving in your bone and your blood
Its accuracy; willing to stand
Always aside from the main road,
Where life’s flashier illustrations
Were marginal.
(“Servant” CP 146)

A major facet of such laudatory delineation consists in the poet’s focus on this field-trudger’s stubborn resistance to adapt to the fast-moving modern world, as well as on his overall continuing persistence, “endurance” (“Peasant Greeting” CP 12), and on his remaining “patient and strong” (“The Evacuee” CP 26) in facing the harsh realities of the weather-beaten, remote rural corners that make his home. The labourer’s relentlessness rings of Piers the Plowman’s sacrificial and soteriological mission. But most of all, in the aggressive world where nature imposes its merciless domination, his lasting fortitude assumes a heroic colouring – one recalls here that the warring imagery we noted before glorifies the farmer as one of “The Unvanquished” (CP 451).

If not surviving indomitably, the ploughman is old and even failing to be fully alive, as it were. This is a trend actualised most strikingly in “The Airy Tomb” (CP 17-20), a poem which plays on the protagonist’s name Twm (its pronunciation in Welsh is the same as the title noun’s), inscribing death into the very core of his existence. In this respect the farmer poems resemble those on Welshmen, a people amounting merely to a bunch of “ghosts / From a green era” (“Welsh” CP 129). This slant in Thomas’s poetry made some complain that his “Wales ... exists almost wholly in the past” (Daffyd Elis Thomas 60).47 There are various ways in which to interpret this trait. As “Welsh” suggests, its role is to idealise by way of stressing the

47 In “Welsh Landscape” (CP 37), the poet “diagnoses” the country as one where “you cannot live in the present.”
protagonist’s liaison with mythologised ancient times. At the same time, it amplifies a certain sense of doom overhanging the depopulating realm of this dying breed.

The complementary presentation of the protagonist, which highlights his heroic character and which unites with topics relating to history and nation, is of importance for our explorations, not least because it exposes the rooting of this verse in the bardic tradition.48 Thomas’s limning his protagonists as “Expatriates” (CP 91), displaced (“The Evacuee” CP 26), and “leaving” the country (“Depopulation of the Hills” CP 28) seems to be a twentieth-century rendition of the bardic lament’s stock motifs of castles standing empty, vanished splendour, and “a culture gone to ruin” (Collins 52).49 His verse can be perceived as offering updated re-interpretations of the usual bardic themes, which deplore the end of old ways, impart a sense of a world lost, and bemoan “the inconsolable tragedy of [the society’s] collapse” (Trumpener 6).

The same tradition also explicates the ascendency of enumerative technique in “Dead Worthies” (CP 467), a poem which resembles the Welsh bardic lineages:50

Where is our poetry but in the footnotes?
What laurels for famous men but asterisks and numbers?

Branwen (Refer below).
Llywelyn – there is but one, eternally on his way to an assignation.

Morgan, no pirate,

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49 In Chameleon Poet, Perry draws our attention to Thomas’s engagement with the elegy (246-81). Interestingly, Collins puts forth a thesis that an elegiac tone, looking to the past and what has been lost, typifies Anglo-Welsh and Welsh poetry in general.
50 In “Allusions,” Jason Walford Davies makes the claim that “Dead Worthies” is indebted to Englynion y Beddau (“Verses of the Graves”), a catalogue from the Middle Ages listing the resting places of legendary notables through the convention of englyn (77). Regrettably, Davies’s commentary is only a passing note “by the way” (77) and the critic does not elaborate on Thomas’s affinity with englyn in terms of e.g. versification and metre.
emptying his treasure from buccaneering among the vocabulary. Ann,

handmaid of the Lord, giving herself to the Bridegroom, still virgin.
Williams Parry, quarrying his cynghanedd among Bethesda slate in the twilight of the language.
Lloyd George, not David,

William, who in defence of what his brother had abandoned, made a case out of staying at home.

This is a strategy of mythologising bygone Wales as a realm of masters of swords and words, with the enumeration working as a quasi-outline of national history. By the same token, the poet seems here to emulate Celtic bards not only in the method of unfolding his utterance, but also in the very adoption of social functions as part of his literary activity. In *Bardic Style in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, W.B. Yeats and Dylan Thomas*, Sheila Deane sees the bardic stance as pervaded with “a sense that poetry was ultimately functional and that the poet had a particular duty with respect to his public” (3). This duty, Jonathan Reinhardt explains, was to tell the audience who it is (28). The performance of this office involved exhorting and praising the lords through enlisting them in family pedigrees and situating them in the tradition of ancient heroes (31). As Reinhardt further elaborates, bards chronicled society history; they also championed a certain

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51 Branwen is a legendary character from *The Mabinogion*. Thomas most probably has in mind Llywellyn the Great, a renowned Welsh ruler from the Middle Ages. William Morgan (1545-1604) authored the first translation of the Bible into Welsh. On the poet Ann Griffiths (1776-1805), see Chapter 4 below (190). Robert Williams Parry (1884-1956) is another poet, a winner of the Chair at the 1910 National Eisteddfod, and the author of two collections of poetry, *Yr Haf a Cherddi Eraill* (1924) and *Cerddi’r Gaeaf* (1952). David Lloyd George’s brother William George (1865-1967), promoted the use of Welsh language in legislation and public administration. Thomas’s poem is from 1987.
code of conduct and values by relating behavioural models (29). The speaker of “Dead Worthies” seems to assert a similarly empowered mandate.

When discussing Thomas’s first volumes, Ward astutely notices their richness in motifs of looking. “Many of these very early presentations of the peasant begin with this act of seeing” (18), the scholar observes, and from the wealth of evidence that he quotes, he concludes that “the poet’s compulsive staring is of considerable importance” (18). On taking a closer look at these motifs, one realises that they tend to appear in the imperative voice, as in “Look at this village boy” (“Farm Child” CP 41), or “and look!” (“The Fair” CP 236). This is to say, their textual performance clearly situates itself in connection with rhetoric.

Strong rhetorical flourish can certainly be named as another determinant of Thomas's style, a style which is heavily dependent on rhetorical questions or injunctions:

Shall we follow him down . . . ?
No, wait for him here. At midnight he will return,
Threading the tunnel that contains the dawn
Of all his fears. Be then his fingerpost
Homeward. The earth is patient; he is not lost.

(“Out of the Hills” CP 1)

Look at his locks, that the chill wind has left
With scant reluctance for the sun to bleach.

(“Man and Tree” CP 7)

. . . What have the centuries done
To change him? The same garments, frayed with light

52 Ward seeks explanation for this peculiarity of Thomas's style in biographical phenomena, ascribing it to the poet's puzzlement that has arisen from the confrontation of his “idealistic expectation” with the facts of life as apprehended after moving to Manafon (19). Thomas certainly informs us of one seminal occasion of meeting the farmer: “On a dark, cold day in November, on his way to visit a family living in a farm over a thousand feet above sea-level, he saw the farmer's brother out in the field docking mangels. The thing made a profound impression on him and when he returned to the house after the visit he set about writing 'A Peasant,' his first poem to attempt to face the reality of the scenes around him” (“No-one” 52). In many poems, however, motifs relating to watching the peasant are employed in a manner that paradoxically undermines the possibility of actual observation. A case in point is “The Mistress,” for instance, where the injunction “See how the earth claims him as he passes by” is purely rhetorical, referring to the invisible fact of man’s ageing. In that poem, the verb “passes by” on its own does evoke an encounter; nonetheless, in the context of the whole text, it acquires the meaning of time-flow and man’s grave-bound waning away.
Or seamed with rain, cling to the wind-scoured bones
(“The Labourer” CP 39)

Indeed, this is so salient an aspect of Thomas’s verse that some critics accuse the poet of adopting “the ringing tones of a preacher” (Ward 19).53 Here, the purpose of motifs relating to visual perception reveals itself: they seem to enunciate a certain wisdom with which the speaking voice is imbued. For, as Ward notes, the hill farmer “is watched by the poet . . . from a raised position” (17). In “Country Cures” (CP 124), seeing becomes analogical to hearing, and both result in knowing:

I know those places and the lean men,
Whose collars fasten them by the neck,
To loneliness; as I go by,
I hear them pacing from room to room
Of their gaunt houses; or see their white
Faces setting on a blank day.54

Motifs of watching can thus be viewed as emphasizing the speaker’s adopted persona of a man of “vision” who can apprehend, weigh and assign values to the world before his eyes, and who offers his commentary to the audience.55

By the same token, Thomas’s rhetoric habitually takes on the shape of appeal and apostrophe, elevating the intercourse between the speaking subject and his addressee as a major theme in these poems.56 The existence of this rhetorically-generated relationship as an important textual element casts further light on their genological aspect. Along with the speaker’s authoritative pose, elaborate technique, lofty subject matter, celebratory tone, and a generalising drift, it situates them also within the convention of the ode.57

53 Similarly, James A. Davies credits the poet with a “manner of the pulpit” (72). See also Stevenson (79).
54 Cf. also Thomas’s poem “The Need” (UP 67).
55 This is of course – one could point out here – not only a priest’s tone, but also the one of a bard.
56 The importance of this relationship is illustrated by the insistence with which it resurfaces as a topic of critical commentary on Thomas’s poetry. See e.g. Stevenson, James A. Davies, and Savill.
57 These traits are listed among the hallmarks of that genre in Carol Maddison’s “classic” book Apollo and the Nine. See also Baldick, “ode” (PEPP), and “ode” (OCEL).
Regrettably, a precise examination of this influence is thwarted by a paucity of research sources.\textsuperscript{58} Irene H. Chayes’ complaint from 1964 remains valid: “Although today we have a better understanding of the major Romantic odes as poems, the general notion of the form remains much as it was a generation ago. What is obviously needed is a method of reassessment that will go beyond the older exclusive and now inadequate concern with prosody, stanzaic structure, and conformity to classical models” (67). Some observations by a Polish scholar Teresa Kostkiewiczowa – who writes mostly of the Polish ode but also puts forward some hypotheses applicable to that genre more generally – may perhaps, with some reservations, be of help in our analysis. According to Kostkiewiczowa, raising the I-you axis to a constitutive factor of the lyrical utterance seems to serve as the distinctive trait which testifies to modelling by ode conventions (13-14 and passim). Further, she argues that this genre’s evolution is determined by modifications in the mutual positioning between the speaker and the object of invocation; to survey the history of the ode is to trace these transformations (14). Chayes seems to concur: her article is devoted to exactly the issue of a different (from Neoclassical) moulding of this relationship which comes with Romanticism, even if – devoid of theoretical inclination – she refrains from formulating general propositions.

A form of discussing literary history, the exploration of genre conventions involves attending to the question of a given author’s awareness of the traditions informing their works; a crucial factor here is the source. While diverse sources are possible, it seems feasible to propose that the ode came to Thomas via the Romantics rather than through classical or seventeenth-century models.\textsuperscript{59} In many respects, the examined poems perceptibly follow the prescriptions for ode-mongering a Wordsworth or a Keats might have produced.

\textsuperscript{58} Maddison devotes merely one chapter to the ode on the British Isles, and closes it on Abraham Cowley. The only monograph discussing the English ode inclusive of Romanticism – by John D. Jump – was written in 1974.

\textsuperscript{59} At the same time, one remembers here Jason Walford Davies’s observation that Thomas’s “Those Others” (CP 111) features an excerpt from Dewi Emrys’s “Yr Alltud” (“Allusions” 83-84). “In this way,” Davis maintains, “a 1948 awdl colours a 1960s English poem’s resistance to cynical, entrepreneurial tourism” (84). The awdl being commonly perceived as the Welsh ode, Davis’s remark provokes also the question of the Welsh genre variant as a possible ancestry.
Amongst the Romantic alterations to the ode, there is the increased complexity in the addresser-addressee relation (Chayes 67). In Thomas’s verse, too, who is speaking to whom is not a simple (or consistent) phenomenon. The complication affects both ends of the intra-textual communication process. As may be expected, in many cases the task of listening is assigned to the protagonist; one needs only look at “To The Farmer” (CP 97), “Chapel Deacon” (CP 76), or “To a Young Poet” (CP 126). In “The Welsh Hill Country” (CP 22), “Portrait” (CP 112), or “A Lecturer” (CP 138), however, the speaker addresses himself to the implied reader, inscribing that reader into the speaker-protagonist relation, and thereby fashioning a three-way entanglement. Thomas’s reminder that the labourer “is your prototype” (“A Peasant” CP 4) foregrounds the correspondence between the delineated character and the perusing person, underscoring their common nature as human beings.

It is not only the recipient of the message that varies from poem to poem. We would also be disappointed if we assumed that the implied author or a priest-poet invariably operates as the speaking voice. Thomas’s poems often assume the semblance of a dramatic monologue. “The Hill Farmer Speaks” (CP 31), for instance, is mouthed by the protagonist (presenting himself seemingly without mediation) and directed towards the intended reader (“Listen, listen, I am a man like you”). Nonetheless, whether it is Prytherch, another ploughing furrow-plodder, or anyone else who speaks, all the utterances – as we have seen in the preceding part of this chapter – form the same consistent depiction of one of the usual Thomasian protagonist types and the world they inhabit. The fact remains that these utterances do not give us a genuine presentation of an individual personality; rather, all the different views come from the (hidden or not) poet-speaker.

The repetitive character of Thomas’s oeuvre – which draws recurrently upon the same motifs, metaphors, and phrasings, and which depicts protagonists in terms of type – is thus combined with diversity in shaping textual communication axes. The effect is that the poetry appears quasi-dialogic, since it gives the

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60 Hence, the descriptions of this poetry as “preaching” are perhaps not entirely fortunate as they fail to take account of the complexity involved, suggesting an untrue, reductionist simplicity, as well as ignoring the textual functions of this phenomenon in Thomas’s verse.
impression of setting particular poems in conversation with one another. We recall here Stevenson’s interpretation of Thomas’s 1955 volume *Song at the Year’s Turning* as a “tangle of conflicts” (86) and “shifts in attitude” (88), in which Prytherch becomes merely “a partner in [the poet’s] purely internal dialogue” (85). Although the critic does not concern herself with rhetoric specifically, her remarks resonate well with what I have observed of the I-you relations in Thomas’s verse. It seems to me, nonetheless, that while his technique may perhaps result from his idealistically-bent mind’s “confrontation with the ‘real world’” (Stevenson 81), it is more importantly signalling an underlying goal “to lay bare the truth in art” (83). 

In so far as Thomas’s multifarious recasting of these relations helps illuminate the same topic from a variety of perspectives, it can also be perceived as yet another manifestation of his unrelenting drive for intellectual, emotional and spiritual searching.

In reinterpreting the addressee-addresser communication in personal dimension, Thomas also follows another of the big shifts of the Romantic ode, which consisted in moving the focus towards the speaker. For the Romantics, the ode becomes a text of inner development and insight gained through reflection. Accordingly, the nineteenth century frees that genre from its foundation in an external occasion: what motivates the effusions is the speaker’s illuminative moment of experience (Kostkiewiczowa 19). On Chayes’ view, the ode evolved into

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61 For Stevenson, these attitude variations lay bare a “struggle . . . within the mind of the poet” (84). Similarly, Savill speaks of Prytherch as a “sounding board for the poet’s personal sense of conflict” (53). Indeed, a quarrelling quality is introduced in Thomas’s poems in a number of ways, including delineation of the countryman, who is both a glorified “impregnable fortress” and a primitive ignorant with a “half-witted grin” – both defining Prytherch in “A Peasant” (CP 4). One can also find oppositions between stanzaic patterns in Thomas’s verse, of which an example can be found in the friction between the Petrarchan versus the English sonnet in “The Last of the Peasantry” (CP 66), depending on whether we look at the division into stanzas or into sentences. Finally, one could mention here the poet’s liking for adversative conjunctions such as “yet” or “but,” which he uses to indicate a turn in the direction of thought in the *volta* – as he does for instance in the above-mentioned “A Peasant.”

62 The nuances of this shift are traced Chayes. An important feature of what the scholar calls the Romantic ode’s “drama” is that the text’s composition is governed by meanders of feeling or thought, “reversals of situation, intension, and direction” leading to a moment of insight and knowledge (68). Here, however, the question arises of whether in a Thomsonian “ode” an illuminative moment has actually been reached. It seems that on some occasions at least, the tension will be left unresolved: the rhetorical question will turn into a real one – we never learn the answer for the closing one posed in “A Labourer” (CP 2), for instance – and the reflection will be driven by perplexity rather than understanding.
a more “solitary” expression registering “an unfolding mental process – meditation, moral reflections, reverie” (67). To put it simply, the Romantics did away with the public character of the ode. Offering a presentation of internal experience, Thomas’s verse displays the same character of a private meditation.63

One conclusion which emerges is that the conventions of occasional poetry bear most strongly on those poems which adopt the farmer for their protagonist, with poems devoted to the wife as the least perceptibly convention-governed. A possible reason behind this can perhaps be found in the more personal nature of the latter texts; as one might expect, the more insignificant the personal aspect, the greater the degree of genre and other patterning. No matter how we conceive of the motives for this tendency, however, there is no doubt that, for Thomas, “occasional” will hardly mean public ceremony, but will instead consist in private, intimate occasions. In other words, Thomas’s poems on the experience of man can be defined as personal lyrics.

63 Similar conclusion seems to be reached by Ward when he opines – of Thomas’s poem “Soil” (AL 28) – that “the stanza seems to be thought rather than said” (22).
Chapter 4: The Experience of Art

Words’ Gallery

“Ut pictura poesis” – “as is painting, so is poetry.” Few propositions have precipitated more comment over the centuries than Horace’s statement from “Ars Poetica.” “Offer[ing] a formula . . . for analyzing the relationship of poetry and painting” (“U.p.p.”), it has also provided traditional tools for discussing particular poems on works of les beaux arts, or, as they are often called, “ekphrastic” texts. I am now going to discuss Thomas’s poetry against the background of this tradition.

By the time the author of “Guernica. Pablo Picasso” emerged on the literary scene, ekphrastic poetry was already well-established, originating more or less twenty-nine centuries ago with the description of Achilles’ shield in Iliad. It is not my aim here to explore the long history and relevant criticism of this tradition, especially as that has already been done by others, and in far greater detail than this work could allow. Nevertheless, for a fuller understanding of the ekphrastic quality of poems analysed here, a few words need to be said on the term’s meaning.

Coming from the Greek words εκ (out) and φραξειν (to speak) (“Ekphrasis,” def. OED), it was initially used in the sense of “telling in full” (Heffernan 6), “to report in detail,” or “elaborate upon” (Golahny 12). These usages hint at the birth of ekphrasis in Greek rhetoric as a particular kind of description, used to increase the

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1 Fragments of this section have appeared earlier in print, with minor changes, as “Ekphrasis Unbound.”
2 The dictum of “ut pictura poesis” is further referred to as “u.p.p.”
3 Cf.: “Though of minor significance within the ‘Ars Poetica’ itself, u.p.p has, since the Renaissance, occasioned an enormous volume of both positive and negative commentary bearing on the kinship of the two arts” (Schwartz). Of course, the idea of similarity or comparability of literature and plastic arts was not born with Horace’s dictum, but had already been suggested earlier on in the classical tradition (e.g. Simonides of Keos). For a more detailed history of this idea, see “U.p.p,” Martin Schwartz “U.p.p..,” and Henryk Markiewicz “U.p.p..”
4 See Norman Land’s Viewer as a Poet for an outline of the history of ekphrasis from the Horatian simile and the u.p.p. theory, through the Late Antiquity rhetoric exercises of progymnasmata, to the end of the Renaissance. Museum of Words, by James Heffernan, traces the history of ekphrastic poetry from ancient Greece until the present day.
power of argument by generating a powerful image in the addressee’s – *nomen omen* – imagination. This power to “place the represented object before the reader’s (hearer’s) inner eye” (Krieger 14) – the so-called *enargeia* – would become the enduring trade-mark of ekphrasis.⁵ Hence, the ever-popular definitions of ekphrasis as a “vivid, detailed account” (Hermogenes of Taurus, qtd. in Land xvi), “descriptive speech bringing the thing shown vividly before the eyes” (Aptonis, qtd. in Land xvi), “description of a work of art” (Webb), or “a literary work which attempts to evoke, describe, or reproduce the impact of a work of art” (“Ekphrasis,” def. OCEL).⁶

It is this ability of the word to create an image which has fascinated scholarly minds. Arguably, the most famous contemporary study in this vein is Murray Krieger’s *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1997). Harking back to the term’s rhetorical application, his notion of the “ekphrastic principle” foregrounds this image-producing capacity of words, and refers not only to texts on pictorial artefacts but all “word-painting” (Krieger 9).⁷ Although James Heffernan – in *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* – distances himself from Krieger’s theory, his considerations are bound to the same categories.⁸ For instance, he conceives of Adrienne Rich’s “Mourning Picture” – a poem on a painting by Edwin Romanzo Elmer – in the same terms as earlier theoreticians: “[h]er language strives to recreate ‘each shaft of grass’ in words that make us feel

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⁵ Cf.: “As an inserted passage intended to make vivid an event, personality, or object, an ekphrasis does not intrinsically refer to works of art. It does, however, indicate a verbal passage that conjures an image in the mind of the reader. The power of the word to convey an image, of whatever subject, is identifiably ekphrastic” (Golahny 12).

⁶ See also the general understanding of the term in ancient Greece, as given by *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*: “an extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary” (Rusten).

⁷ On the other hand, the critic seems to comprehend far more by than did the ancient rhetoricians: for him, “word-painting” is an inherent characteristic of poetic structure in general. That is at least what he seems to understand by his “generic spatiality of literary form” (264). As this spatiality is also the distinguishing feature of “ekphrastic principle,” the latter is implicitly applicable to every poetic text. In this respect, Krieger’s propositions raise questions about the effectiveness of “ekphrastic principle” so broadly understood as a tool for analysing poetry. Thus, Heffernan criticises Krieger’s theory as one of only “minimal” value (192 n.5) and as one that “stretches ekphrasis to the breaking point: to the point where it no longer serves to contain any particular body of literature” (2).

⁸ Cf. e.g. “I must disagree with Krieger when he treats ekphrasis as a way of freezing time in space” (Heffernan 5). See also his critical discussion of Krieger’s theory (2).
‘its rasp on her fingers’ and see ‘the map of every lilac leaf / or the net of veins on my father’s / grief-tranced hand’” [emphases mine] (136-37). What Heffernan discusses here is of course the enargeia at work to reproduce the original image in the reader’s mind.

Heffernan’s phrasing needs some attention here, as it points to another important aspect of ekphrasis. To be more specific, it posits that enargeia works as a “recreation” or, in other words, “reproduction” of a pictorial artefact in a different medium.⁹ In the introduction to his book, Heffernan postulates the definition of ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of visual representation” (3). In “The ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn,’ or Content versus Metagrammar,” Leo Spitzer understands it as “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art, which description implies . . . the reproduction, through the medium of words of sensuously perceptible objets d’art” [emphasis mine] (207). What is important here for my study of Thomas’s verse is that designations such as “reproduction,” “representation” and “re-creation” assume a fundamental connection between the depicted work and the depicting text.¹⁰ In other words, an ekphrastic poem needs to be on a painting (or, to be precise, a work of visual art), and it needs to take note of its most essential features, that is what is pictured and how it is pictured.

As can be seen in my brief survey of various theories, a shift has gradually taken place in the way we comprehend ekphrasis. As Krieger notices,

The early meaning given “ekphrasis” in Hellenistic rhetoric . . . was totally unrestricted: it referred, most broadly, to a verbal description of something,

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⁹ Cf. similar phrasing by Land: “Students of art literature . . . generally use the term ‘ekphrasis’ to refer to the verbal re-creation or evocation of a work of art in prose or verse” [emphasis mine] (xvi).

¹⁰ Stephen Bann noticed and critiqued the extent of this conviction: “Ekphrasis as a genre of writing is dependent first of all on the risky presumption that the visual work of art can be translated into the terms of verbal discourse without remainder. In other words, the text about painting or sculpture is assumed to have an absolute adequacy to the objects which it describes. . . . Is there no room for the recognition that effects of colour and accidents of pigment endow painting with an absolutely specific quality which cannot be reduced to verbal description?” (28-29).

¹¹ This conviction also underlies the theories which define ekphrastic poetry through its function of “interpret[ing] imagery through text” (Golahny 11). Such an understanding of ekphrasis appears in the first English definition of the term, i.e. in John Kersey’s Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum from 1708. A number of commentators on Thomas’s ekphrastic poetry follow this approach. Thus, for instance, Shepherd speaks of the poet’s “[i]nterpreting the painting” (45). A variant on “interpretation,” “commentary” also occupies a prominent position in the lexical repertoire of critics discussing this poetry, such as Robert Rehder (87) and Helen Vendler (58 and passim).
almost anything . . . Although works of the plastic arts . . . were often cited among the many sorts of objects of ekphrastic description, there was no suggestion that ekphrasis was confined to them . . . Yet the narrowing of the objects of ekphrasis to works in the plastic arts does eventually occur, probably influenced by the fact that some of the most striking examples of ekphrasis were devoted to objects, real or imagined, from the plastic arts . . . The range of reference of the word “ekphrasis,” as it becomes a technical generic term, seems to become restricted in order to conform to those examples, those diverting descriptive interludes, that commentary habitually selected as the great ekphrases. And the connection of ekphrasis to works of pictorial art gradually becomes a firm one and continues into the modern era. (7-8)

Krieger’s remarks concern the object of ekphrasis, but he also links the narrowing of that object with the change in the technique’s status to that of a literary genre.\(^\text{12}\) The critic might have had in mind the theories of W.J.T. Mitchell (152), Williams H. Race (75-79), Stephen Bann (28), and others, which are all marked by that generic notion of ekphrasis.\(^\text{13}\)

This elevation is somewhat amazing when we consider that it has never been accompanied by a fully-fledged diachronic study of ekphrasis as a literary genre with a variable set of conventions, or even, as a matter of fact, with a synchronic study sensu stricto. From our survey, it becomes obvious that the distinction of ekphrasis as a genre has taken place on the basis of a single criterion – and a criterion which is, in fact, thematic. Amy Golahny admits it expressis verbis when explaining that “[a]s presently applied, ekphrasis designates the text that expresses the poet-reader-viewer’s reaction to actual or imagined works of art” (13). Similarly, for Mitchell, ekphrases are “poems which describe works of visual art” while ekphrasis is “the name of a . . . topic” (152). Krieger is quite unique in applying the concept of spatiality (and thus of the “ekphrastic”) not simply to the poem’s theme but also to its structure (or “form”).

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\(^\text{12}\) There are, of course, various views on what constitutes the object of ekphrasis, some of which do not comply with Krieger’s observations. Question as they may the binding of ekphrasis to pictorial artefacts, they still remain faithful to the idea that ekphrastic description concerns (a) work(s) of art. For a brief overview of those positions, see Heffernan (192 n.6).

\(^\text{13}\) It is perhaps worth noting that the shift in the understanding of ekphrasis from that of a technique of evocative description to that of a genre is also visible in now common naming of particular texts using this technique as “ekphrases” – see e.g. Golahny.
A difficulty arises at this point. Based on the sole criterion of theme, the “genological” understanding of ekphrasis offers a static notion of genre. As early as 1924, Yuri Tynianov demonstrated that “a static definition of a genre . . . is impossible” (“Literary Fact” 32). Genres are complex, dynamic constructs with numerous components, undergoing unstopping evolution (Opacki). In the light of the above reservations, it seems more legitimate to speak of ekphrasis in its more original sense, as the technique of an elaborate description involving a multiplicity of (spatial?) details. Such an understanding of ekphrasis also seems to me a more efficient critical tool, allowing us to examine poetic texts as artistic works instead of the simple black-and-white (ekphrastic-or-not) classification. It is in this sense that I am going to use the term in my appraisal of Thomas’s poems on pictorial artefacts.

Such poems constitute a major part of Thomas’s literary output, beginning with “On a Portrait of Joseph Hone by Augustus John” in his first volume, Stones of the Field, from 1946, through “The Anunciation by Veneziano” (from Laboratories of the Spirit, 1975) and “Dic Aberdaron” (Welsh Airs, 1987), to “Mother and Child” (in Frieze, 1992). Alongside single poems spread throughout his entire œuvre, there are also Ingrowing Thoughts (1985) – the volume devoted exclusively to high modernism in visual art – and Between Here and Now (1981) with “Impressions,” a collection of thirty-three poetic responses to French Impressionist canvases from the Louvre. In a sense, Thomas’s interests covered a whole gallery of feats of the brush. This gallery, however, is in the end words’ gallery. In as much as pictures are now mediated and showcased in verse, they give room to an exhibition of other artistic skills, namely the artistry of words.

I will thus begin by exploring this process in Thomas’s writing. To better show how it takes place in particular poems, I proceed by way of a series of discrete interpretations.14 Bringing to the fore structural networks, this method allows us to appreciate how motifs from a painting are selected for the sake of semantic enrichment rather than pure description, spotlighting the poetry’s own aims.

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14 For my understanding of the term “interpretation” and its usage here, see the introductory chapter of this thesis (17-19).
same time, the method adopted also enables an evolutionary approach, tracing the same liberating process across Thomas’s whole oeuvre. The following readings are thus organised according to how strongly the poems are bound by their source works and by the demands of ekphrasis – that is, from texts determined by the eye’s experience to those which break free to tell of a poetic rather than painterly mastery.

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As the title announces, Thomas’s “Guernica. Pablo Picasso” (IT 9) is devoted to the masterpiece which Eberhard Fisch dubs as “the most important anti-war picture in the history of art” (22). The poem addresses its topic in five sentences spread over eighteen lines, characteristically laid out with every second line beginning not from the top but in the middle of the line-space, as it were:

The day before
    it was calm.
In the days after
    a new masterpiece
was born of imagination’s wandering
    of the smashed city.
What but genius can re-assemble
    the bones’ jigsaw?

Pablo Picasso Guernica
The bull has triumphed
at last; the tossed
humans descend up-
side down, never
to arrive. The whole is love
in reverse. The painter
has been down at the root
of the scream and surfaced
again to prepare the affections
for the atrocity of its flowers.

The functionality of this graphical organisation reveals itself as early as in the opening part of the poem. Supplementing their loose syntactical parallelism, such a layout enables the placing of two contradistinctive adverbials of time (“the day before” and “in the days after”) in similar positions, one directly beneath the other. This helps juxtapose and contrast the two situations they respectively introduce: “a new masterpiece” emerges as opposed to “calm.” The grammatical incorrectness in the phrase’s use of the preposition “of” after “wandering,” if treated as a part of a sentence, demands not a syntax- but verse-wise reading of the phrase. Repeated, the preposition suggests a parallel between “imagination’s wandering” and “the smashed city,” the implication being that the “masterpiece” has its source in both. Thomas clearly follows the usual critical interpretation of Picasso’s painting in seeing it as a rendition of the town’s disintegration and of the violence which brought that disintegration about.

With its Cubist technique involving episodic treatment and presentation of bodies in disconnected fragments, the painting resembles a puzzle that needs putting together to form an ordered whole. The motif of “the smashed city” (smashed, that is not just destroyed, but broken into pieces) and the metaphor of the “bones’ jigsaw” are thus quite clearly elements of an ekphrastic strategy of description. Admittedly, there are no bones specifically in the painting. Guernica is, however, undoubtedly a picture of death, and therefore the “bone” in Thomas’s poem can legitimately be attributed to that word’s semantics in numerous cultural codes, in which it functions as a metonym for dead body (with the potential to be

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15 Cf. Herschel B. Chipp on Picasso’s method: “It relies upon free association and the irrational juxtaposition of unrelated elements” (112).
revived). It is in this sense that “bone” was used in Numbers 19:16, for instance; furthermore, “reassembling bones” was what Ezekiel did when resurrecting Israel (Ezekiel 37). The speaker’s question about the potential to “re-assemble / the bone’s jigsaw” can thus be interpreted as asking about a vital – life-giving – power of restoring order. It seems that in this particular poem, a poem on a work of genius, an identification of that power with Picasso is doubtful, simply because in Guernica nothing is reassembled. Quite the contrary, the poem – as we have seen – agrees with art critics in conceiving of the canvas as a portrayal of complete disintegration. Moreover, instead of “who,” the pronoun “what” is used by the speaker, implying a non-human and non-personified agent. Therefore, it is more correct to read the sentence as asking about another power, as different from that of genius, which is capable of such resurrecting action (that is, if not genius, then what can resuscitate and bind things back?). What kind of force would that be? And in view of the graphical outline putting “what” and “the bull” in parallel positions, what is the connection between the two?

The bull is, of course, a figure in the painting, and accordingly, it is a descriptive element in the poem. The poet characterises the beast through its relationship with man, specifically through the motif of its “triumph” over “humans,” reinforced with the image of its tossing them up. Thus that relationship assumes the form of tauromachy – Thomas invokes the longstanding Spanish tradition of bullfighting, which is universally believed to stand behind the depiction of the bull by Picasso. Contrary to its most usual end in the corrida, however, in the poem the animal wins “at last.” Moreover, it is presented as an attacker – a trait which suggests that Thomas might have followed such interpretations of the canvas as that of Herbert Read. The English critic’s reading construes the painted scene of massacre as “betray[ing] the passage of the infuriated bull, who turns triumphantly

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16 Cf. e.g. Cavan Brown’s interpretation of that Biblical story: “We know that one of Israel’s prophets, Ezekiel, had some queer visions of desert scenes, which prompted the question . . . Can you put flesh on dead bones?” [emphasis mine] (9).

17 The poem’s allusions to the corrida have also been noticed by Rehder. On the other hand, as the critic adds, “[w]hether Thomas knew of Picasso’s interest in bullfighting or his many, obsessive drawings of the Minotaur is unknown” (97). On the corrida’s importance for Guernica, see Chipp (100 and passim).
in the background” [emphasis mine] (“Picasso’s ‘Guernica’” 6). 18 Thomas’s interpretation draws as well from the semantics of “bull” across various cultural and religious codes, especially its association with power, death, violence, tyranny and bestiality.19 The poet highlights that last association by naming the victims as “humans” and putting the word directly under “the bull,” so that the parallel positioning of the two nouns brings out the inherent contrast. 20 The poem’s world model is thus one of a reversed natural order, in which not only the bull kills the man, but also there is no life-securing domination of the human(e) over the brute(al).

This reversal finds its more direct expression in the motif of people turned “upside down” by the animal’s assault. The passage is also strikingly replete with internal contradictions (oxymoron of “descending up,” the paradox of moving “never to arrive”), and therefore marked, as it were, by conflict and non-sense, evocative of chaos and disorder.21 Violation of logic is complemented here by a similar violation of the English language. For not only do enjambments disregard the binds of a grammatical segment, such as a phrase, but even a single word (“upside”) is divided into two separate parts spread across two consecutive lines (thus eliciting the oxymoronic image of people “descend[ing] up” on top of that of descending “upside down”). This strategy of cutting the sentences, phrases, or even words into pieces implies violence and reflects the “disassembling” of the “jigsaw,” suggesting the fundamentality of division in the beast-dominated world. The pandemonium in the Spanish town and its reflection in Guernica, or – in the poet’s

18 We do not know where Thomas saw a copy of the picture, or if he had access to any interpretation of it. However, we know that the Welsh poet read at least two of Read’s other publications on contemporary art (Surrealism and Art Now belonged to Thomas’s book collection), and that he wrote on works of art discussed or printed there. The poet’s location (e.g. “triumph”) and his understanding of Picasso’s Guernica suggest Read as a probable source. Read’s construal of the bull as the attacker and wrong-doer is, of course, not the only one. Nonetheless, majority of critics understand the animal-figure in a more complex way. See, for instance, Fisch (46-7, 129, and passim) and Chipp (112).
19 On bull symbolism see for instance Suzetta Tucker “Christ Story,” Ad de Vries Dictionary (68-70), and Donald K. Sharpes Sacred Bull.
20 Cf.: “Picasso and his time had indeed good reasons to inveigh against, and to despair of, the most primitive aspects of our zoological depths” (Larrea 27). See also Sharpes: “The bull uniquely represents that ancient struggle [i.e. man’s struggle for survival] and the bullfight is a lingering symbol of man’s triumph over the ferocity of animal nature” (11).
21 Cf. Juan Larrea’s description of Guernica as “a mysterious drama of vital disorder” (13).
words – the “whole” of the bull’s work, emerges as the concoction of disunity, “love / in reverse.”

In the context of the painting’s theme of war casualties, it is possible to conceive of “love in reverse” as an instance of love defeated, as Robert Rehder does in “R.S. Thomas’s Poems about Painting” (97). But the poem also points to a straightforward opposition here: while “whole is love,” the state of disunity seems to involve simply the divorcing force of hate (the “reverse” of “love”). The bull-destroyer becomes a sign of the power antonymous to the “re-assembling” feeling which we often also call “attachment.” The “whole” can be understood as signifying unity; but it also constitutes a summary of Picasso’s masterpiece as well as a reference to the sum total of the havoc wrought by the attacker (in the double sense of the animal in the poem and of the Nazi air force-cum-Spanish Nationalists in Spanish Civil War). In the context of bombing and of people tossed up into the air now to “descend,” that is fall down, the “whole” functions also as a pun on “hole” – a hole created by a bomb explosion, or the hole of a grave. Through that, it brings to mind a gap in the ontological continuum of man’s existence as well as the view of death as lack (of life).

The last sentence of the poem provides a concluding summary of Guernica through the image of the artist’s being “down at the root / of the scream” and resurfacing “to prepare the affections / for the atrocity of its flowers.” The context of “root” and “flowers” reminds the reader that plants consist of parts above and beneath the surface of the earth. On the other hand, in as much as the following line defines the “root” as one “of the scream,” another sense of that word is suggested – a more metaphorical one, namely that of an underlying cause and origin. Scream is here an obvious reference to Picasso’s picture, whose not-yet-dead figures are almost all depicted as shrieking. The alliteration of “scream” and “surface” (sibilants!) endows the line itself with a screaming quality, which contributes to the poem’s ekphrastic character, hereby translating the visual detail into the medium of language (and thus of sound). As well as being indicative of pain and agony, the metaphor harks back to the earlier intimations of hate which brought that suffering into being. In other words, the poem’s final sentence
summarises *Guernica* as a “study” of the underlying reasons (“roots”) for the discord, hurt, and death.

The painting itself is spoken of through the metaphor of the painter’s “affections / for the atrocity of its flowers.” The metaphor needs to be considered in context – the ambiguous pronoun “its” might refer here to either root or scream. Perhaps, as Rehder proposes, the metaphor is grounded, again, in Picasso’s masterpiece, where “the cry is torn from the figure with its mouth open and hands up” (97). By the same token, the pronoun’s ambivalence, and the possibility that it refers to “root,” allows us to interpret “flowers” as the outcome of hate. This metaphorical sense sheds light on the word “atrocity,” oxymoronic in relation to “flowers.” Why, however, flowers specifically?

Since Picasso’s work features only a single flower, the text’s plural form arrests the reader’s attention, provoking questions about possible other sources. The poet may have taken for his model Baudelaire’s ironic use of the flower symbolism in *Fleurs du Mal* (“Flowers of Evil”). Perhaps more correctly, however, the motif’s *fons et origo* can be sought in association of flowers with mourning and death, attributable, for instance, to the brevity of their life, or to their role in funerals and as embellishment on tombs. One of literature’s most famous stories about flowers is Ovid’s tale of the slain Hyacinthus, out of whose blood the flower of hyacinth grows, with its *cry* of mourning “ai” inscribed on its petals (239-41). It is possibly to such traditions that the poem returns here. For all that, the alliteration of “a” in the sentence emphasises, among “atrocities” and “affections,” also “again,” suggesting that “flowers” might equally be used in the poem because of their association with the spring and thus revival. In this, the poem exhibits affinities with interpretations of *Guernica* such as that offered by Anthony Blunt, who asks: “Is it permissible to see in this motif an allusion to the anemone which sprang from the blood of the dead Adonis and which became a symbol of his resurrection?” (qtd. in Fisch 124 n.5).

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22 My discussion of the various meanings attached to “flower” is based on Ferber and de Vries (194-95).
In a detailed analysis, we could see that Thomas’s poem addresses Picasso’s masterpiece by picking up its most vital features – including the motifs of the bull and its human victims, the topics of war and the resulting suffering, as well as the techniques of contrast and fragmentation à la “jigsaw.” In this text, the poem’s artistic patterning is directed by descriptive purposes. This can even be said about its visual organisation. Cutting off phrases in a manner similar to the way in which body parts are severed in the picture, the strategy underlying the poem's line-breaks emulates Guernica, suggesting violation, emotional and “reality” distortion, and heart-tearing torment. But even more than that, the graphical layout seems to divide the text not only into lines but also into two sides, left and right, as it were. In this way, it reflects the theme of people in conflict, as well as the Spanish civil war's origins in rivalry between left-wing and right-wing political parties. The poem can be called “word-painting” in the sense that it uses graphical phenomena to convey the main characteristics of the painting and its historical background.  

It is unsurprising, then, that such a graphical format is missing from another of the ekphrastic poems by Thomas, on a work also approaching the problematics of war but in a manner different from Picasso. Father and Child (1946) is a less known piece by Ben Shahn, a Jewish-American artist noted particularly for his social realism mode. In contrast to the Spanish modernist, Shahn’s is a more conservative and representational style, influenced not so much by experimental techniques of the twentieth century as by the Italian Renaissance and by experience with lithography and photography. The artist’s “innovative touches” are largely limited to “[b]road planes, simplified contours, mostly unmodulated colors”

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23 Heffernan sees referrals to background information as a feature of contemporary ekphrasis (8). In this respect, “Guernica. Pablo Picasso” is not an exception amongst Thomas's dealings with paintings. The same interest is also visible in his “Monet: Portrait of Madame Gaudibert” (BHN 23), or “Cezanne: Dr Gachet’s House” (BHN 35), although in the latter poem, the mention of “the earless painter” seems to confuse Cezanne with Van Gogh.

24 In a review of Shahn’s exhibition from 1999, featuring Father and Child, Robert Silberman admires “how well he learned from his chosen Italian masters [Giotto and the Florentines] in his sense of pose and placement, space and architecture, story-telling and mood,” his “caricaturist’s gift for capturing character in a few bold strokes,” his skill with line and his “graphic sense” (509). As the exhibition’s curator Susan Chevlowe points out, the artist regarded his narrative style as “antithetical to the aims of modern art” (8). He “disavowed any direct connection to Surrealism” (Chevlowe 20); he also confessed to “antipathy” for abstraction, and instead “preferred to teeter on the edge of figuration to make his bid for what he called painting’s humanistic potential” (Lee 64).
(Kuspit 97). Father and Child well exemplifies these traits, demonstrating figurative simplicity with an almost poster-like quality of the sketched silhouettes and their surroundings.

![Ben Shahn Father and Child](image)

The painting depicts what appears to be a fleeing family in a winter landscape with a village or town behind their backs. The chief point of focus is the father. In his arms there is a bundle of bright swaddling-clothes, which hides a baby – as we can infer from its shape and from the work’s title. In the second plane, just behind the two, the slightly smaller figure of the mother trails, holding what looks like a photograph of an ancestor. In order to reveal the escapees’ departure point, a narrow strip of buildings is visible in the distance, between leafless tree branches, with cannon-like chimneys sticking out into the blue sky.

The picture is representative of Shahn’s mature style, in which he repeatedly addressed the theme of war-time destruction, anchoring it in an individual experience to suggest its coterminous universal validity (Polcari 72-73 and passim). To this end, he frequently harnessed mythological and biblical imagery (Polcari 73,
Silberman 509, Lee 63-64). As Stephen Polcari argues – borrowing Abernethy’s commentary on Benton Spruance – “by linking the present to familiar and parallel representations of the past [Shahn too] was able to emphasise the timelessness of human experience” (101). It is the intersection of these features that the poem “Father and Child. Ben Shahn” (IT 13) takes up:

Times change:
no longer the virgin
ample-lapped; the child fallen
in it from an adjacent heaven.

Heaven is far off, back
of the bombed town. The infant
is human, embraced dearly
like a human mistake.

The father presses, his face set,
towards a displaced future.
The mother has salvaged her mother's
portrait and carries it upside down.

Both Shahn and Thomas “are concerned with a terrible experience of the twentieth century of the refugee, the displaced, the driven out . . . The poem, too, recalls roots going back to other families which are central to our culture and suggest both repetition in human experience and perhaps a darker world” (Boam and McCann). To put it simply, the poet presents the fleeing family through an analogy to the Holy Family.25

Thus he juxtaposes the picture’s title with the mention of “virgin,” “lapped,” to send us back to the traditional iconographical theme of “Mother and child,” which places the baby Christ on the Madonna’s knees. This reference is also supported by such signals as “infant” and “heaven” (which is the child’s origin, in

25 Cf. “We are reminded that Exodus is now; the flight into Egypt the flight from eastern Bosnia” (Aspden and Roberts). In addressing this issue, however, one needs to remember that Shahn himself was Jewish, and therefore, the question of whether he draws on the Holy Family myth as one of his religious sources is open for debate. While the painter is certainly known for his heavy reliance on Jewish motifs, he does not refrain from harnessing myths from other cultures in some of his works, including Allegory and Harpy. As his wife observed, Shahn “deeply appreciated the observances, the ritual and lore of his inherited Judaism but also was profoundly moved by the sonorous Masses of Catholicism and, again, by the tough spirit of early Protestantism” (Bernarda Bryson-Shahn, qtd. in Pohl 127).
Certainly, the mention that the infant is “human” would be redundant if it wasn’t also supposed to remind us of this other – divine – toddler from before “times change[d].”

The passing of time, however, brings not only alterations in the types of figures depicted. According to the poem, the old icons present a positive world model (a world of an “ample-lapped” virgin, marked by friendly divine participation manifest in the more-than-“human” baby’s coming from “an adjacent heaven” [emphases mine]). By recalling that model, the poet furnishes a bold contrast designed to illuminate the world of present-day family. As in “Guernica. Pablo Picasso,” semantic potential is enhanced through tension between verse and syntax. Thus the modern realities feature a mother who is “no longer the virgin” – the line not only invokes Mary, but also characterises the world as one that lost its innocence (and thus, implicitly, its virtue). The same suggestion recurs in the phrase “the child fallen,” echoing man’s Fall, and hereby bringing to mind the expulsion from Paradise. An impression is pressed upon us here that the human experience in Shahn’s piece, as perceived by Thomas, is not merely a version of the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt, but also that it perpetuates the fate of the first migrants in history, Adam and Eve. The child becomes now only “like a human mistake.” Finally, instead of Christ diving down from heaven, bombs are now dropped on the town, with the verb “salvaged” hinting at damage inflicted by a cataclysm, here specifically by fire. A network of these interrelated metaphors, signs and suggestions help “illustrate” in a negative way the contemporaneity depicted in Shahn’s piece. It is a realm of hostile forces at work, marked by war and ruin.

This unfriendliness is strictly connected with an increased distance from heaven, now “far off, back / of the . . . town” from which the family comes. Natural in American English but surprising in a text by a British poet, the preposition “of”

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26 The term “infant” has been applied to Christ in numerous paintings, e.g. Francesco di Giorgio’s Saint Dorothy and the Infant Christ (c1460), Francisco de Zurbarán’s The Virgin with Infant Christ (1658), or Pieter Fransz de Grebber’s The Virgin Teaching the Infant Christ to Read (c1630). A resemblance between the little baby in Shahn’s work and the newborn Christ can perhaps be spotted in the painting’s snowy setting, inviting associations with December.
(instead of “from”), accompanying “back,” draws the reader’s attention to the significance of the phrase. Granted, it can be seen as simply pointing to the spatial distance between the sky and the painting’s foreground – namely the father, child, and mother – given that the small patch of the firmament there seems to be the farthest part of the background. Nonetheless, the wording itself (“heaven,” not sky!) and the accompanying allusions to the Holy Family reveal that the phrase also has a metaphorical meaning, referring to the remoteness between the Creator and the postlapsarian world. Positioning “back” at the end of the line, the speaker seems to suggest God has turned his back on the town. “Far off” is used here not only with respect to place but also with respect to time, with God’s engagement in human affairs slipping into a matter of the past. In other words, it is not only the spatial distance which has changed but the “times change” as well: with no Incarnation happening these days, humankind has to come to terms with the Deity who has become a Deus absconditus.

Thomas’s poem appears thus to pivot on the device of contrast, emphasizing that something is wrong with this age, which is an “upside down” version of the era of Bethlehem. At the end of the poem, the reference to the position of the old mother’s portrait summarises the contemporaneity, as it were. Constructed with motifs and suggestions such as those of bombs, ruin, and escape, the poem’s world model mirrors its 1946 predecessor. The poem is ekphrastic in its overall adherence to both the general import and details of Shahn’s work. Importantly, however, the final summarising comment fails to be consistent with the painting, and consequently drops the technique of ekphrasis: the ancestor’s portrait is held, in Shahn’s piece, not exactly “upside down” but tilted, with its longer side in almost horizontal position. Rather than referring to the picture, this comment is

27 The catalogue of the James Thrall Soby collection in the Museum of Modern Art in New York – to which Father and Child belongs – directly spells out the painting’s connection to war: “The burnt-out village was probably inspired by photographs the painter had seen of Europe’s wartime ruins” (Collection 64). According to Polcari, Shahn’s depictions of World War II abound in “images of destruction, chaos, ruin,” and so on (75). Such commentaries on the painting and on the painter’s style might have motivated Boam and McCann’s reading of the red bush in Father and Child as being in flames.
subordinate to the poem’s own world model. However important the aim of description may be for the text, the painting fails to provide all the key elements.

That this is not the sole case of such manipulation is clear when we look at “Monet: The Bas-Breau Road” (BHN 17), where the rough surface of the title road becomes “looking-glass smooth” for the interpreting speaker. In “Degas: Absinthe” (BHN 43), the painting’s poorly dressed woman now sports “good” clothes, “out of the top / drawer, the best her class / could provide.” Thomas pushes this strategy even further in a poem on Drawing by a Child by the British Surrealist Diana Brinton-Lee:

All of them, Mummy and Daddy
in their various disguises –
   it is my revenge on them
   for bringing me to be.

And, oh, yes! The toys
who play with me, whose justification
   I am. I take my revenge
on them, too, giving them claws,

indices of the underworld
to which they belong. Can you imagine
   how a doll snarls? With
what relish a kitten converts

its tail into a serpent?
And horns, horns for everything
   in my nursery, pointing to the
cuckold I know my father to be.

(“Drawing by a Child. Diana Brinton Lee” IT 49)

As its opening lines reveal – with their stylisation of the language in “Mummy and Daddy” – Thomas’s poem models itself on the source piece in so far as it takes on the persona of a child as the speaker. Given that the text poses as the child’s explanation of its drawing, the adoption of this voice seems linked to an interpretative aim underlying ekphrastic description.
Brinton-Lee’s work imitates a child’s doodling in that it does not have a coherent sequential composition but presents a series of discrete mini-drawings spread out on a single page. Similarly, the poem develops by way of accretion of predicate-free clauses (in four of the seven “sentences,” the supposed main clauses are without a conjugated verb), coordinate clauses, apposition, added afterthought, and so on. In accordance with ekphrastic technique, the poem’s composition is governed by the descriptive enumeration of “all of them” – that is, the items sketched by Brinton-Lee.

Thus the first stanza opens the list with “Mummy and Daddy,” who are portrayed in “various disguises.” The latter motif obviously justifies the former, for the Surrealist artwork features no adult human figures. By the same token, it points to a certain quality of trickiness, treachery or enmity in the poem’s world model, more explicit in the offspring’s clarification of drawing as “revenge . . . for bringing me to be.” The child’s unwillingness to exist, by implication, helps characterise its life as involving pain, and the surrounding world as cruel. In this poem, again, something is wrong with the world.
Accordingly, the second stanza overturns our traditional notion of human beings as active agents in contradistinction to passive still-life objects: here, it is the toys “who” play with the child. Furthermore, the motifs of their “claws” and “horns” help to bring the toys alive by animating them. One only needs to think here about teddy-bears to recall that toys are often made in the form of plush beasts. At the same time, a source for this zoological imagery seems to lie in Brinton-Lee’s piece, in which the majority of figures are animals. The equivalence thus arising, between the elements of the child’s world and the creatures, presumably derives from the experience of the Modernist work.

Functions of the poem’s fauna imagery, however, are not exhausted with ekphrastic aims. Given that the pencilled articles are constituents of the world of the nursery, their choice and depiction in the poem serve as a means of characterisation of that world. Ordinarily, it would embrace things that are nice, soft and fluffy, designed for a child to like them. Not so in Thomas’s poem. Here, the metaphor “a doll snarls” suggests anger as well as potential aggression. Similarly, the “claws” signal dangerousness and the predatory nature of the toys. Animal imagery helps to construct the world’s image as menacing and unfriendly.

Drawing the reader’s attention through its sound orchestration, featuring alliteration of /k/ and accumulation of /t/, the metaphor “kitten converts / its tail into a serpent” introduces another correspondence which turns the likeable into the sinister. The term “serpent” is applied these days chiefly to the larger and more venomous species, as a sign of malevolence or wiliness, or in reference to the Tempter of humans and their Biblical forefathers in Eden. All these connotations of threatening peril, malice and evil seem valid here. This is especially evident in the final reference to horns, an attribute of some animals but also of the devil.

The metaphor of “claws [as] indices of the underworld” casts further light on the nature of this poetic universum. The metaphor hinges on the ambiguity inherent in the words “indices” and “underworld.” Among its other meanings, Thomas plays here on the meaning of “index” as the fore-finger. Simultaneously,

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28 This reversal of the relationship between the child and toys in Thomas’s poem reminds us of Yeats’s “The Dolls” (126).
however, the word also means “a sign, token, or indication” (“Index,” def.) – here, of the underworld “to which they belong.” What is that underworld? In our culture, the term has been used to denote, among others, a world of the “night and dead” – as Edward B. Tylor referred to Hades in his *Primitive Culture* (“Underworld,” def.). In a frightened child’s imagination, the beastly toys seem to turn into living monsters representative of Hell. As the final line discloses, the child creates the drawing (or, its verbal “explanation” of it) with the view to taking “revenge” on the parents – for treating it as a plaything (instead of allowing it to play with them?) – by representing them as devilish creatures as well as revealing the mother’s betrayal and “pointing to the / cuckold I know my father to be.”

To sum up, the child’s persona, the zoological motifs, and arguably even the presentation of the world as ugly seem to have their source in the work by the London Surrealist. The utterance’s underlying interpretative aim, the descriptive enumeration as compositional frame, and the text’s grammatical features inform us of the poem’s ekphrastic character.

One might feel inclined to conclude with this observation, but there are certain limitations to such a reading. After all, there are no adults in Brinton-Lee’s work – and by introducing the motif of disguise, the text only pretends to stick to the Modernist artefact. Thomas introduces his own motifs, absent from the sketch – such as the one of revenge or of the mother’s cheating on the father – while manipulating other details. For instance, although there is a cat in the drawing, and perhaps one of the creatures might be interpreted as a snake, there is no kitten that would have a serpent for a tail. Moreover, in the picture, only one figure has horns. Finally, it is in no way clear if the animals are toys or just animals: nothing in the drawing itself legitimises the poem’s interpretation of them. The sole justification may be found in the drawing’s title, identifying it as by a *child*. It is only through this identification that the ground is created for an association of the presented
creatures with the nursery. Thus the poet’s interpretation seems to revolve more around its title than the picture itself.

By the same token, the poem achieves a certain degree of independence from the work on which it is based. While in “Father and Child. Ben Shahn,” one detail from the painting was changed slightly to ensure a more consistent and pointed rendition of the world model, in “Drawing by a Child. Diana Brinton Lee” Thomas goes further in his poetic licence. By carefully selecting the components from the visual artwork and inserting them in metaphorical relations to service the text’s own ends, the poet informs us that he pursues his personal interpretation, inscribed into a child’s monologue. Metaphor and sound orchestration establish correspondences, and the choice of vocabulary (for instance “serpent” as preferred to “snake”) makes use of its connotations to propose such an interpretation.

The case of “Degas: Mademoiselle Dihau at the Piano” (BHN 25) is no less interesting. The poet begins with an evaluation of the pianist’s position, and of the situation it might indicate:

Asking us what she shall play?  
But she is her own  
music, calm rather than  
sad, mahogany-toned. We listen to her  
as, on an afternoon  
in September, the garden listens  
to the year ripening. Almost  
we could reach out a hand  
for the mellow-fleshed,  
sun-polished fruit  
that she is. But her eyes  
are the seeds of a tart  
apple, and the score a notice

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29 Thomas saw the drawing in Read’s Surrealism (plate 96), but the book does not proffer any interpretation of it, focusing instead, as it does, on the characteristic features and tendencies of Surrealism in general.

30 The same trend to hang a personal reading of an artefact on its title is illustrated also by “Cézanne: The Repenant Magdalen” (BHN 29), where the word “repenant” inspires the poet to construe of what is most probably three hooks on the wall as “three tears.” “Van Gogh: Portrait of Dr Gachet (BHN 63) draws from the fact that the painter’s model belonged to the medical profession, describing him as having “eyes like quinine” and as “listen[ing] / to life as it describes / its symptoms.” See also “Still-life. Carl Hofer” (IT 18).
against trespassing upon
land so privately owned.

Indeed, in the canvas, Mlle Dihau is seated at a piano, with notes in front of her, and with her head turned over her shoulder towards the observer/painter — a position that certainly might have been assumed to ask the audience a question. The speaker’s surmise seems thus natural enough.

Edgar Degas *Mademoiselle Dihau at the Piano*

Nevertheless, the question mark with which the first line ends signals tentativeness. The negative conjunction “but,” opening the following line, bespeaks a paradoxical relationship between (the interpretations of) the model herself and her pose: there is no need for her to play the instrument because she is already “her own / music.” The equivalence is supported consistently in the sentence, through the choice of adjectives applying to both music and people, namely “calm” and “sad.” She is also, curiously, “mahogany- / toned”: conspicuously complex and clearly metaphorical, the last of this series of epithets attracts the reader’s attention particularly strongly. While its second component undoubtedly relates to the
tonality of music, the context of the surrounding adjectives reveals that the suffix also derives from “tone” in its most basic sense of mood. The fourth line, consisting solely of “sad” and “mahogany,” plays on the association of dark colours with gloominess and melancholy (even if sadness is mentioned by the speaker only to be immediately questioned). It is hard not to notice, at this point, that mahogany is quite a suitable term to define the general atmosphere in the canvas, quite sombre, dominated by tenebrous shades. Dihau herself seems to be in black, the brown blotch of her hair merging with that of her sable clothes. 31 Thus it appears perfectly reasonable to ascribe the source of the adjective to the painting. Granting this ekphrastic character, it is still puzzling that the speaker chooses “mahogany” instead of the simpler “brown.” Moreover, he breaks the line in the middle of the full expression, thereby highlighting the primary sense of the word as the name for a certain type of tree.

This meaning is propped up by the motif of a garden, in “We listen to her / as . . . the garden listens / to the year ripening.” The simile can perhaps be tracked down to nature’s cyclical patterns – the woman partaking therein through menstruation. It seems it is in this sense that we can speak of a woman as “ripening”: menses is a sign of a girl’s bodily and sexual maturity. “Year ripening” also functions here as metonymy: it is of course natural produce which turns ready for picking in September. Indeed, the metaphor of “the mellow-fleshed, / sun-polished fruit / that she is” attests to that reading, with an important role played here by the choice of vocabulary (“flesh” applying to both fruit and human body) and sound orchestration. More specifically, the accumulation of /l/ in the epithets of “mellow-fleshed” and “sun-polished” contributes to the impression of ripeness, softness, and tastiness. In view of these considerations, we can draw the conclusion that the above motifs, imagery, diction and phonetic ordering impinge on the presentation of the woman as possessing an appetising bodily appearance and

31 At least in the reproduction in Germain Bazin’s book Impressionist Painting (111), on which Thomas based his poems from Between Here and Now. Ward sees the canvas as fuller of colour, emphasising “the strong red of the lips” and of the model’s head dress; but he also notices that “all of this is powerfully contrasted by vast spaces of dark brown and blue of dress, hair and piano itself” (132).
sexual appeal (after all, it is her “flesh” which holds so much attraction). In this light, it is easy to understand the complementary motif of reaching out the hand for Dihau-fruit: our culture has long ago made the plucking of fruit a conventional image of defloration (Carson 145-148, Mullins 86). Drawing from this repertory, the speaker implies that the portrayed woman is becoming – as Virgil spoke of his Lavinia – “iam matura virō,” “now ripe for a man” (22).

The object of desire, however, can only “almost” be plucked. In so far as Mlle Dihau is only a protagonist of an ekphrastic poem, the phrase points to the fact that she now exists only on the flat surface of canvas. The history of ekphrasis has supplied many similar remarks, usually serving as expressions of admiration for the painter’s mimetic skills which make the speaker teeter on the verge of believing in the real existence of what is in truth only a few dots of paint.32 Of course, the comment also reminds us that, after all, it is not a fruit but a woman that Degas has painted. For all that, the poem’s last sentence hints at yet another reason for the speaker’s hesitancy.

The sentence hinges crucially on the metaphor “her eyes / are the seeds of a tart / apple.” Thomas makes extensive use of the semantic richness of “tart” here. Breaking the word’s tie with what follows, he uses versification to suggest a reference to a certain type of woman, pointing again to Dihau’s sexuality. The following line brings a refinement, putting the term in the role of an adjective describing an “apple.” In the emergent metaphor, we can spot a further development of the equivalence between the model and fruit – the latter now specified as Malus domestica. A traditional sign of Venus, the apple often stands for a beautiful female figure. Equally, we can look for the source of this correspondence in the colour and shape of Mlle Dihau’s brown eyes (as she is looking to the side, they narrow down towards one end). With Ward, her eyes “push out like apple seeds” (132).33 Paradoxically, in spite of her being “mellow-

32 For more on ekphrasis and verisimilitude, see e.g. Heffernan (4, 33, 37 and passim), Land (5-15), and Bann (27-40).
33 Perhaps this hypothesis is undermined, to a certain extent at least, by the fact that Thomas uses the same imagery in an earlier poem, not on a work of art. The protagonist of “Madam” is “willing to kiss; / But her lips say, / Apples are sour” (CP 240). Cf. also Thomas’s “Mother and Child” (CP 461).
fleshed,” “sun-polished,” and “ripening,” and thus one might expect sweet, the epithet “tart” assumes, when qualifying the pomaceous treat, the sense of “acidic.”

In reference to the young woman painted by Degas, we can perhaps read the epithet as referring to her age: she is a beauty who is appetising but as yet only “ripening” not ripe, still a Mademoiselle rather than a Madame. The promiscuity is merely latent, for she only has “seeds of a tart” [emphasis mine]. By the same token, the speaker’s withdrawal can perhaps be viewed as a fear that once “consumed,” the woman will become (a) “tart” (after all, she will then stop being “private”). But the scope of what is intimated reaches even further: Thomas seems to invoke here the popular interpretation of the Original Sin as sexual intercourse. In as much as the motif of “the garden” [emphasis mine] endows Dihau-apple with the character of Forbidden Fruit, the poem also plays with the notion of sour “fruits” – that is, consequences – of someone’s deed (and with the customary association of the Latin term for apple, malus, with the homophonic adjective meaning “bad”).

Thomas’s poem emulates Degas’s portrait in focusing on the pianist. After a brief comment on her position, the poet’s discussion of Dihau develops in four descriptive sentences: while one is built on simile (“We listen to her as . . . the garden listens to the year ripening”), two are based on the subject-predicate construction of “she is,” and the third deploys a similar “her eyes are.” The text is – untypically for Thomas – peppered with adjectives, many of which render the atmosphere and colours of the canvas. Certainly, this is indicative of the ekphrastic tradition. However, in this particular poem, the adjectives fulfil a more complex function. Both their profusion and intricacy contribute to the impression of abundance inherent in the “year ripening” in an autumn garden. Their aesthetic quality evokes tastiness of the produce. Epithets are also vital in enhancing semantic richness of the nouns and phrases they define, supporting and developing the poem’s core equivalences. They qualify the predicative complements which are

34 Shepherd understands “tart” as defining the woman’s behaviour, referring to “the implied rejection in her glance” (25).
35 Some helpful resources on this tradition include David L. Jeffrey Dictionary (252), de Vries (18), and Ferber (12).
supposed to describe the lady but which are, in fact, music, fruit, and an apple. Only one of these (the music) has grounding in the painting (the pianist is at her instrument); rather, they constitute a means of protagonist’s metaphorisation.

Thus we can say that the description develops by way of metaphors and equivalences, the majority of which build a specific associative field, namely that of the garden and Forbidden Fruit. The identification of Mlle Dihau with an apple has only a slender or even questionable basis in the painting: cultural tradition seems an equally if not more plausible source. As my analysis demonstrates, what matters most for the observing speaker is the model’s sex. This blatantly contradicts our knowledge of Degas as “the painter of the interior life” (Bazin 110). The speaker’s description fails to match Degas’ portrait: as Rehder notices, “[t]he somewhat plain looking Mlle. Dihau . . . is a ‘mellow-fleshed, / sun-polished fruit’ – and ‘mahogany-toned’ (BHN 25), although in Bazin her face is a pale tan with rose cheeks” (93). In this light, the negative conjunction “but,” in the second line of the poem, seems to reflect the speaker’s rejection of the more traditional way of interpreting the canvas.
The same strategy of subordinating tropes and devices to a dominant equivalence can also be seen in Thomas’s “Degas: Musicians in the Orchestra” (BHN 27). The painting shows a group of suit-clad players in a dark orchestra pit at the Paris Opera. About one fourth of the canvas – the space immediately above the musicians’ heads – is taken up by the contrasting, illuminated stage filled with dancers in bright, sparkling ballet skirts. Besides situating it in the painter’s career and disclosing the names of his models, Bazin’s appraisal of the work’s theme, composition, setting, light, colour and contrast, exposes – naturally enough for an art critic – his interest in its artistic achievement.36 With Thomas, the thematic and technical originality, the art-historical significance of the painting, is lost. The poet seems to move straight to the situation presented in the canvas:

Heads together, pulling
upon music’s tide –
it is not their ears
but their eyes their conductor

has sealed, lest they behold
on the stage’s shore
the skirts’ rising and falling
that turns men to swine.

The opening comment – “heads together” – exhibits descriptive character, for Degas’s protagonists are crowded in a relatively small space. We see full silhouettes of the first row of performers only, with their mass imparted in the painting through a multiplicity of heads. In the poem’s first and second lines, however, that descriptive element becomes already metaphorised. Not only does the metaphor “music’s tide” introduce a correspondence between music and sea, but the full

36 “It was a bold and hitherto unexploited notion to draw attention to that part of the theatre which is usually poorly lighted and sacrificed to the stage... It was while painting this scene that Degas, with his painter’s eye, crossed the footlights for the first time and discovered the artificial lighting and the dancers performing their steps above the heads of the musicians in the orchestra. A second recording was thereby superimposed on the first, of quite a different universe, made of light, with dazzling colours and idealised creatures. The contrast between these two zones, joined together by the crosier-shaped handle of the double-bass, interested him so much that he did not bother to show the whole stage. The dancers are cut off at their shoulders and legs. This is the first example in his work of those unexpected settings which he so often used later” (Bazin 112).
phrase “[h]eads together, pulling / upon music’s tide” renders the musicians similar to sailors or rowers in a galley. Supporting this identification, “ears” bring to mind oars, due to the closeness of sound of the two words. It is possible to see these tropes – as Shepherd does (26) – in light of a resemblance between the rows of artists in Degas’s work and rows of oarsmen onboard a ship. Although the musicians remain – de necessitate – motionless in the painting, their metaphorical depiction in the poem might also have its source in their imagined swaying to the music: such swaying to and fro can give rise to an association with waves or the tidal pattern. Another possible motivation may be the comparability of the flow of music and tide in the popular imagination.

A crucial light on these metaphors is cast, however, by the next part of the poem, with its motif of “sealing” the eyes of the musicians. Its most obvious sense is of course of the orchestra’s conductor having fixed the players’ gaze – a reference, with all probability, to their need to carefully observe and follow the patterns of his hand movements, and to the alignment of the musicians in the painting (they are all facing in the same direction). This reading, though, is perhaps open to the objection that such a strong fixation on the maestro is not evident in the picture – the painted figures plainly seem intent on their playing, even if they are all oriented towards him. More importantly, the conductor is conspicuously absent from the canvas. The question immediately arises of that figure’s function in the poem. A significant insight can be gained in the following part of the stanza, specifying the aim of his “sealing” his charges’ eyes: he protects them from noticing the skirts’ movement and, through that, from the danger of being turned into pigs (“lest they behold / . . . the skirts’ rising and falling / that turns men to swine”). In view of the conductor’s protective role, it appears that he should be understood not only as a person in a certain musical profession, but in the broader sense of a leader or guide.

Now the suspicion arises that the verb “seal” may be used here in more than the one meaning of attracting musicians’ attention. For some reason, the speaker has not just introduced the motif of the players’ fixed gaze, but has positioned that gaze in relation to the sense of hearing – as the syntactical and graphic parallelism visualise (“not their ears / but their eyes”). This emphatic construction suggests
certain unexpectedness in this fact, and, through that, sends us back to another story of “sealing,” namely the famous account of Odysseus’s stopping his sailors’ ears with wax to prevent them from hearing the song of the sirens. As we can see, the verb “sealed” also works in the text in the senses of “to block” and “to render deaf/blind.”

The metaphor “stage’s shore” continues the sea-cum-sailing imagery of the poem; there, the “skirts’ rising and falling” evokes not only the movements of the dancers to the music, but also the undulating rhythm of sea waves beating on a beach (indeed, the taffeta tutus, as painted here, create an illusion of a bright foam – similar to that produced by splashing waves). At the same time, the allusion to The Odyssey, together with the suggestion of danger waiting on the shore, clearly points to an implied equivalence between the girls onstage and the pernicious sirens of Homer’s epic. The devastating consequence of observing the nymphs of the opera – turning to pigs – indicates that the reference to Book XXII merges here with another Odyssean adventure, namely the king of Ithaka and his crew’s meeting with Circe. What links the two episodes? The daughter of Helios is traditionally perceived as a seductress using her sexual power to keep the Greek hero on her island. The power of the sirens’ song is such “that it paralyzes its auditor with desire so that he is left to die slowly as he listens to it” (Ledbetter 28). It is the motif of female creatures that lure a home-bound sailor out of his original course that proves crucial for the poem, as is also laid bare by the allusion to sexual acts, inherent in the motif of “skirts rising and falling.” Such a conclusion also recalls the motif of “swine” as an allegory of uncleanness and sensuality, both in ancient Greece and in contemporary European culture.37

This interpretation of Degas’ dancers in erotic terms is not entirely surprising, given that in the nineteenth and early twentieth century opera dancers had unenviable reputations. What is more, they are presented in the painting only up to their waists: a device which might perhaps be perceived as sexualising. One does not need to dwell on the fact, though, that such an interpretation of the painting is highly unorthodox in view of Bazin’s claim that Degas’s depiction of the

37 On the semantics of swine in both cultures see Ferber (155).
dancers is an outcome of technical solutions, bespeaking their relative unimportance in comparison with the play of light and dark (112).

In identifying the dancers with libidinous temptation, Thomas foregrounds the issue of sexuality, placing them and the musicians in a broader, human dimension, as opposed to the specificity of the painting. Importantly, his elucidation of the protagonists as “musicians” takes place only through the poem’s title, which, in turn, is solely the citation of the author and title of the painting. The two stanzas substitute the word with the totally unspecific pronoun “they.” It appears that it is the broader sense of “men” – as proposed in the last line – that we should apply to the protagonists. Far from being merely described in their place of work, the musicians undergo metaphorisation into travellers wandering in search of a safe harbour, in permanent danger of being deterred or even prevented from reaching the homely shore at all. This is to say, the poem manifests its indebtedness to “the patristic exegesis of the voyage of Ulysses as a type of the Christian journey” (Jeffrey 256), and to the allegorical tradition of presenting life as a sea-voyage.38

Our study of the poetic expression in “Degas: Musicians in the Orchestra” has made plain that – like “Degas: Mademoiselle Dihau at the Piano” – Thomas’s poem is definitely not just a description of the canvas. With the picture it shares the motifs of music, stage, skirts, and protagonists’ heads. Only the last are “described,” depicted as being “together,” close to one another as they are in the painted orchestra. Importantly, all of the above motifs are set here in a metaphorical context not entirely or not clearly dependent on the painting. The text does not have a single adjective; the three epithets (in “music’s tide,” “stage’s shore,” “skirts’ rising and falling”) are all nouns, and they constitute parts of tropes feeding into the main equivalence of the musicians as seafarers. This underscores the fact that the poem develops more by way of metaphor than description. For all

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38 “Degas: Musicians in the Orchestra” can be seen in the context of Thomas’s pervasive penchant to rely on this tradition, which I discussed in the preceding chapter of this thesis (“People in Experience” 106-107, 115 n.27). Thomas is of course not unique in harnessing the story of Odysseus in his recourse to the sea-voyage allegory – one only needs to recall Samuel Daniel’s “Ulisses and the Syren” as one of similar poems. On the place of the Odyssey in this allegory, see Edwards, Rahner (328-86), and Jeffrey (254-59).
these reasons I cannot agree with Shepherd when she states that “the resulting poem has much in common with Degas’s experience” (26). As was made clear by Bazin, the Impressionist piece is very much the work of a painter, and one that is strongly aware of the painterly challenges of the scene. I have already pointed out that Degas’s technical and stylistic interests never make their way into this poem, so that it differs in this regard from the poems on Guernica and Drawing by a Child.

Giorgio de Chirico The Child’s Brain

Thomas’s “The Child’s Brain. Giorgio di Chirico” (IT 29) is another poem which dismisses the painterly technique. In spite of de Chirico’s relatively unobtrusive style of representation, as compared to Picasso or Brinton-Lee, there is still much to be said of, for instance, his well-known preoccupation with architecture and its manifestation in this particular canvas. This fascination is evident here, especially in the painter’s placement of the depicted figure in an urban setting of buildings, walls, windows, and so forth. It is visible even in the very treatment of the male body, which makes the portrayed man resemble a statue
more than a living person. Alternatively, one could address the issue of the use of
colour by the Italian artist, of pivotal importance in *The Child’s Brain*.

As a Surrealist, de Chirico’s work is usually interpreted in the light of
Freudian theory, most often in terms of the father-son rivalry (Soby, *de Chirico* 74-75; Ford). Summarising various interpretations, James Thrall Soby speaks of “a portrait of the artist’s father, motivated by childhood fears of parental authority” (*de Chirico* 74). According to the critic, the father’s external appearance – the blackness of his moustache, hair and eyelashes – bespeak his masculinity; the child’s fear of looking into his father’s eyes manifests itself in the fact that they remain closed (74). Standing for the mother, the book in front has a red marker inside, which, along with a red chimney, is a phallic sign of the father’s sexual desire (74-75), and/or of sexual union between the two parents, which the child resents (Ford).

In contrast to these interpretations, Thomas’s poem neglects the marker and its erotic implications:39

The book is as closed
as the mind contemplating
it, vocabulary’s
navel in all that gross flesh.

While the school reminds,
windowless at his left
shoulder, how you open
either of them at your own risk.

Instead, hinting perhaps at the shut eyes of the depicted man, the starting point is the fact that the “book is as closed as the mind.” The “mind” alludes to the title’s “brain,” betraying how the speaker is here going against the usual interpretation of the canvas, not only in his interrelating of the book and mental capacities (in contradistinction to the mother’s body), but also in his identification of the painted figure with the child (not the father). Certainly, the portrayed torso by no means looks like that of a child. Given this, one could point out that the “mind” may as

39 For all we know, Thomas saw the painting in Read’s *Art Now* (plate 49). The reproduction is not accompanied by any interpretation.
well belong to anyone contemplating “it” (the book, or maybe the picture?), including the poem’s speaker himself. Undoubtedly, the pronoun defining the object of this intellect’s scrutiny is ambiguous enough to refer to both, and therefore to enable at least these two interpretations of “mind.”

The interrelation between the mind and the book works together with the ambivalence as to what is “vocabulary’s navel in . . . flesh,” with the sentence structure enabling us to apply this metaphor to both. In a metaphor matching the fleshly and the abstract, the “navel” works in a double manner, both drawing on its meaning as the “centre” and denoting the scar of the umbilical cord: “centre” is substituted by “navel” because it is “in all that gross flesh.” This is an obvious reference to the painting, dominated to a large extent by the ugly “bulging torso” of the male figure, quite disgusting with its “flabby pallor” (Soby, de Chirico 75, 74). The book lies on the table immediately in front of the man and is conspicuously colourful against the background of his pale upper body; it is placed exactly where we might expect the man’s navel to be. By the same token, in this combination of the – “gross”! – flesh and the mind, the stanza seems to invoke the traditional antinomy between the two.

The motif of “vocabulary” points to one rationale behind the mind-book equivalence, namely its conjoining of two phenomena which both operate lexically. Certainly, such a rationale is independent of the painting, endorsing our hypothesis of the speaker’s “rebellion” against the generally accepted interpretation of the book as standing for the mother. In Thomas’s text, the similarity between the mind and the volume is perceived in terms of the potential for communication. Interestingly, both are “closed” (and thus, the poet seems to intimate, the communication process fails to take place). The man in the painting does not read the book. And no one can “read” his mind – something that is also attributable to the fact that he keeps his eyes shut.

In our examination of the poem so far, we can see that it resembles de Chirico’s work in that it revolves around the relationship between the portrayed figure and the book. However, the poet departs decidedly from the source painting in his interpretation of that relationship. The second stanza goes even further in this departure. Even in its very first line, the new motif of the school is introduced
– which, notwithstanding the speaker’s pretence of positioning it in the canvas (“at . . . left shoulder”), is purely his own invention. Given that on the left side of the painting the view is partially blocked by a curtain, it must indeed be the space above the protagonist’s left shoulder (thus, on the canvas’ right-hand side) that is supposed to feature a windowless school. Admittedly, there is a certain building in the background there. Nothing, however, in the painting itself, prompts an interpretation of that building as a school. Quite the opposite: Gordon Onslow Ford sees it as representing the artist’s future that can bring “the as yet unknown mysterious woman whom the young painter hopes one day to meet.” Moreover, the building is quite obviously full of windows; while those on the lower level are dark and therefore can perhaps be perceived as covered or non-functional, the ones on the upper floor are beyond question open to the sky (part of which can be seen through them). Such a self-willed alteration provokes questions. Why does the poet define the building as a school? It seems that the source for this motif may be the speaker’s (or title’s) identification of intellect as belonging to a child, as well as the depiction of a book as one of the painting’s principal elements. But is the school important because it is an institution in which children learn and grow into adults? Why, then, is it “windowless”? The epithet suggests a darkness of closure, intimating that the school is neither receiving nor bringing light. That is to say, the supposedly educational establishment neither is enlightened, nor ensures intellectual enlightenment. The suggestion of failure at the passing on of knowledge brings to mind the suspension of the communicative process implied earlier. The epithet “windowless” links with the motif of closed mind (eyes) and book (both indispensable for scholarly instruction).

That is perhaps why the school “reminds” us that opening “either of them” poses a risk, whether it be school, mind (eyes), or book. Certainly, education enjoys the good opinion of British and Welsh society. Why is, then, knowledge dangerous in Thomas’s poem? Might this devaluation be indebted to the story of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Paradise because of their eating from the Tree of Knowledge? Is the poem’s notion of knowledge empowered by the Scriptural and Romantic conception of a child as innocent? In so far as there is a Christian tradition linking the Edenic existence with childhood, the pursuit of knowledge can be viewed as
replicating the Original Sin. Alternatively, closure ensures safety, and – through that – “reminds” one of the risk inherent in opening a building, a window, a book, and a mind.

The poem does not specify what risk is posed by such an action. It does not fully solve its network of suggestions and correlations. It seems, however, to touch upon the issues of fear, communication, expression, and learning. In this, it refuses to comply with the painting’s theme. Developing its own thought through multiple resemblances and equivalences, it emerges as a criss-cross web in which everything “reminds” one of everything else: the school of the mind, the mind of the book, and the book of the school, again. The poem takes Thomas’s habit of renouncing allegiance to ekphrasis even further, adopting a highly personal perspective which does not have much in common with the source work. Familiarity with the generally accepted analyses of the Surrealist artefact, or even with the work itself, is not needed for an understanding of the poet’s text.

In the case of “The Good Inn. Frits van den Berghe” (IT 26), such familiarity may even result in confusion when we set Thomas’s version against its Belgian fine-arts predecessor. The poem is particularly challenging. Its opening, however, pretends to be descriptive, commenting directly on the painting – namely, on its supposed economy (“Nothing is here / but essentials”). Such restraint seems reflected in the text’s relative brevity (it consists of eleven lines) and in the shortness of its lines, which rarely exceed two or three words:

Nothing is here
but essentials
the bicycle that conveyed
him his thirst
sharpened by unpalatable
truths and the woman
reaching far down
into unmentionable
depths to draw up
the female alcohol
that will not assuage him.

The opening of this presumably ekphrastic poem provokes us to expect that the speaker will subsequently concentrate on the most crucial details of van den
Berghe’s canvas. However, readers find themselves quickly in doubt and uncertainty: lack of punctuation marks obscures the named items. Are these all the nouns in the text (that is, bicycle, thirst, truths, woman, depths and alcohol)?

Hardly an important motif in the canvas, the bicycle is nonetheless put by Thomas at the top of the list. By contrast, the poet makes no mention of the boat, in which the couple is placed.\textsuperscript{40} Indeed, although the two-wheeled vehicle is merely lying onboard – \textit{transported} rather than operating as a \textit{means of transportation} – the poet seems to insist on its role as the sole, or at least the most significant method of reaching the inn. Based on our everyday experience, the most obvious reading of the lines “the bicycle that conveyed / him his thirst…” would be to put a mental comma before the last two words. Such a reading would involve an understanding of that thirst as one of the essentials of the painting. In so far as we accept this interpretation, however, we are confronted by a difficulty: the division into lines suggests an interpretation of the bicycle as a metaphorical means of

\textsuperscript{40} In 1923, the year when he produced \textit{The Good Inn}, van den Berghe was in Afsnee, Ghent, on the River Leie. Ghent itself, including the house in which the artist grew up, and in which his family lived, was at the confluence of the Leie and the Scheldt. For more on the painter’s life and his closeness to rivers, see Emile Langui \textit{Frits van den Berghe}. 

Frits van den Berghe \textit{The Good Inn}
making the man realise his hankering. This is in accordance with the double sense of “convey” as “carry” to a place and as “communicate” a thought, feeling or other information.

Importantly, thirst appears in the text as a part of metaphor “sharpened by unpalatable truths,” based on the equivalence between “truths” and food. The equivocal adjective “unpalatable” intimates both an unappetizing meal and an unpleasant fact or idea. The manner in which the motif of craving occurs in the poem suggests that it should not be treated literally but rather perceived as some kind of (spiritual?) desire.

The metaphorical character of “thirst” is also obvious in the second half of the poem, although it involves different implications. Playing on hints of lust, the closing lines position the woman as striving to quench it, by providing the man with “female alcohol” (even if her attempt is doomed to failure as “that will not assuage him”). The text engages here the negative connotations of “alcohol” in our culture as an escapist means of securing temporary relief. A metaphor on its own, “female alcohol” intimates a certain connection between the beverage and womanhood. Accordingly, it is drawn not from, let’s say, a pitcher or a barrel, but from “unmentionable depths” – terms quite inadequate in referring to an inn, or even to water (of a river?) in The Good Inn. In this context, it is perhaps possible to see the “depths” as referring, instead, to the womb, in compliance with various religious codes identifying femininity with the tomb, cavern, and the deep of the chthonic regions.\(^1\) Another interpretation of this enigmatic phrase might be simply to treat it as a comment which foregrounds the woman’s complexity.

As we can see, the poem appears to revolve around the problematics of desire(s) and gender – themes that do not seem to be addressed by the painter. Even a fleeting glimpse at his piece makes it obvious that the woman there is not giving the man anything to drink, but merely paddling. Indeed, neither protagonist is \textit{in} the inn. Rather, they are outside, in front of it, arriving by boat (the cups and goblet above their heads indicating that van den Berghe’s inn is the building on the shore, behind the man’s back). The alcohol offered by the woman is here a poetic,

\(^1\) On this tradition, see Sjöö and Mor \textit{Cosmic Mother} (71-76), and Jerzy Cepik \textit{Jak człowiek} (68-72).
not painterly creation. In this light, it seems reasonable to conclude that out of all the elements of The Good Inn, it is only the female figure and the bicycle which are the “essentials” enumerated. Indeed, on a closer look, the compositional and syntactical shaping of the poem seems to confirm this supposition. The conjunction “and” in the middle of the sixth line suggests a division of the text’s one sentence into two clauses of five and a half lines each, with “bicycle” and “woman” in the role of the respective subjects. The question remains then as to why these two elements have been selected. It seems to be of importance that the word “bicycle” consists of two parts, as it were, and thus comprises in itself a suggestion of “cycle” (such as the menstrual one). We have already seen Thomas’s poem on Degas’s portrait of Marie Dihau consider femininity in such terms – so it does not appear entirely illegitimate to look for a similar association in this poem, bringing an otherwise relatively minor element into prominence. On the other hand, in so far as the full word speaks of two cycles, one can perhaps see here an evocation of the female breasts, one set next to the other in a way similar to that of a two-wheeler.

Whatever our understanding of the puzzling motif, it becomes evident that not only the poet’s interpretation but even his choice of elements has little to do with the painting itself. The text is not a description, or an interpretation of van den Berghe’s work. Notwithstanding his pretence to describe this work’s “essentials,” Thomas focuses more on the implications inherent in the title motif of the inn – revolving around thirst and alcohol – but bestowing on them a metaphorical character. Confusion caused by orthography actually detaches us from the source artefact, which disappears from our view to make place for the text’s own imagery. No wonder, then, that the poet’s reading of the female figure so blatantly contrasts with what is presented by the Belgian artist.

Nor is the expressionist artwork so economical: its richness of detail does not differ from that of de Chirico’s painting, for instance. The Good Inn has many elements and motifs that are simply ignored by the poem’s speaker, including the boat and paddle, the dishes, and the setting of the city. The motif of “essentials” seems rather an effect of the poem’s internal strategy, its own bareness, its own economy – driven by the theme of insatiable thirst and thus implied deprivation. This theme impinges also on the text’s heavy reliance on negative expressions –
from “nothing,” “unpalatable,” and “unmentionable,” through “will not assuage,” up to the “thirst” itself. In contrast with poems on Guernica and Drawing by a Child, for instance, the construction of “The Good Inn. Frits van den Berghe” is not modelled on the painting but governed by the poem’s own theme. Indeed, as my interpretation shows, it is impossible to understand Thomas’s text in light of van den Berghe’s work; seeing the latter does not contribute to our understanding of the former. It is simply enough to know the poem’s title (and, through that, also, that it is on a painting). Indeed, our expectation of the poem’s ekphrastic character – ultimately disappointed – we owe mostly to that title and to the accompanying reproduction of van den Berghe’s picture in Thomas’s volume. The pretences at ekphrasis seem only to underscore the text’s creativity in outgrowing the limitations of that technique.

Similarly, due to the poem’s title, the readers expect “Monet: Rouen Cathedral, Full Sunshine” (BHN 73) to discuss one of the French artist’s renditions
of the Gothic church in Rouen. Again, the reader is set up for a disappointment. Monet “contemplated the principal façade of the cathedral” in order to study the play of light and its effect on the building’s outward view (Bazin 260). Nevertheless, the very first word of Thomas’s text – the negative conjunction “but” – heralds the poet’s departure from the Impressionist original. Even in the same first line, the speaker announces that his interest lies not in the surface but, conversely, in what is “inside”:

But deep inside
are the chipped figures
with their budgerigar faces,
a sort of divine
humour in collusion
with time. Who but
God can improve
by distortion?

There is
a stone twittering in
the cathedral branches,
the excitement of migrants
newly arrived from a tremendous
presence.

We have no food
for them but our
prayers. Kneeling we drop our
crumbs, apologising
for their dryness, afraid
to look up in the ensuing
silence in case they have flown.

Accordingly, he proceeds by commenting on “figures” – none of which are visible in the painting. We can only guess if the speaker has in mind the statues inside the

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42 Bazin, Thomas’s source, stresses that “[l]ight was all that interested Monet” (260). Cf. also the brief note on the painting in an Internet gallery: “Monet painted many of his most famous motifs in series. The Cathedral series was painted from several angles and at different times of the day. The Cathedral series was more of an exploration of light and shade, and the varying colors of the day than it was of a building” (“Claude Monet Painting”). Another site writes about the painting in a similar way: “Monet, it is clear, was as little concerned with the subject, masterpiece of Gothic architecture though it was, as when painting his Haystacks. Where the building invited and challenged his ability was in the fretting of the surface as it caught the light and the profound effects of shadow in the deep recesses” (Pioch).

43 The opening “but” suggests that the text is a response to and is developing in opposition to something, as it were, something that obviously existed or took place before the actual text. In this case, the title – graphically before the text itself – points to Monet’s painting.
cathedral, some figures in the doorway, perhaps, or maybe even sculptures adorning the building’s façade but hidden, as it were, in the thick layer of the paint. In the context of “distortion” and “time,” the epithet “chipped” suggests that the speaker is evoking some eroded sculptures. When he speaks of God’s ability to “improve by distortion,” he seems to be playing on the semantic complexities of that epithet – the negative overtone implying damage to the surface, and the positive one of sculptural creation.

The distortion endows the statues with “budgerigar faces.” The metaphor is curious in that it introduces an Australian bird whilst referring to a work of French art. Melopsittacus undulatus is a highly nomadic species (Forshaw 134); accordingly, the speaker foregrounds the mobility of the sculptures-birds (“migrants,” “newly arrived” and “flown”). The equivalence is further expanded with a complementary amalgamation of the church and a tree in “a stone twittering in / the cathedral branches.” “Twittering” is used here in more than one sense, referring to birds’ chirping as well as agitation and “the excitement of migrants.” Thus the metaphor attributes to the stone the very qualities it is usually characterised as lacking. The statues’ animation leads to a paradoxical image of them, and of the church, directly observable in the oxymoron of “stone twittering.” Perhaps, this is provoked by the painterly qualities of Monet’s cathedral, made of boulders but at the same time rendered shimmering by the play of light. One can also observe at this moment that Monet’s impressionist technique makes the painted objects resemble a gathering of leaves: he paints by accreting small leaf-

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44 While Shepherd interprets the poem as speaking of the cathedral’s interior (43), Rehder suspects that “inside” may refer here to sculptures in the cathedral’s doorway and to the thick covering of the canvas with many layers of paint (90). At the same time, however, he notices the obvious difficulty with this supposition, namely the lack of such figures in the painting, and thus he concedes that the motif of the inside “seems inaccurate, disconnecting the poem from the painting” (90). Whether we understand “inside” in its simplest literal meaning, or as a metaphorical reference to the painting’s texture, we cannot escape the fact that there are no sculptures in Monet’s work, and – as “but” reveals – the poem does not undertake an ekphrastic description.

45 Cf. “Requiem” (CP 435) and “Cadenza” (CP 415).

46 Indeed, it provoked Shepherd to remark that Thomas’s vocabulary here is a “whimsical choice” (43).

47 Cf. “a bird, annually migrating” (“Spring Equinox,” CP 21); “I was no tree walking, / I was still. They ignored me, / the birds, the migrants / on their way south” (“A Thicket in Lleyn” CP 511).

48 Cf. similar paradox in “Country Church” (CP 11).
like blotches of paint. The overall effect is that of blurred contours and softness of texture, but also of depth and a certain volatility.

The birds are “newly arrived from a tremendous / presence.” The context of God and his ecclesiastic abode suggests that “tremendous presence” should be understood here in a religious sense: the epithet is traditionally applied to the Christian Deity, and the noun might be seen as a variation on His name “I am.” This supposition is supported by the motif of “prayer” which is supposed to entice the winged figures in the same way that “crumbs” attract birds (“crumbs” and “prayer” appear in the poem one just above the other, both accompanied with the pronoun “our,” which emphasises their analogy). The birds’ appearance here can thus be seen in the light of that tradition which entrusts them with the role of messengers from the Supreme Being. Indeed, the suggestion that the “figures” (human-like, with faces) are similar to birds (and so, implicitly, have wings) provokes the thought of angels, often and naturally enough represented in ecclesiastical sculpture. Their silence in reply to the prayer reminds us that the figures are, after all, merely stone statues.

The final part of the poem drops any pretence of describing the canvas (even if the motif of prayer links with the title’s identification of the locale as a place of worship). A discursive drift has already been augured in its first stanza, namely in the speaker’s speculative wondering “Who but God can improve by distortion?” Indeed, the concluding lines pick up this drift, turning meditative more than descriptive, and developing as a thought on prayer with respect to the universal human condition. The collective subject “we” directly spells out this generalisation. Neither does the situation considered by the speaker demand the church’s specificity – we do not pray in Rouen cathedral only.

It does not demand a huge effort to realize that in spite of the “leafy” manner of Monet, the cathedral pictured on the canvas is not really a tree. What is more, there is nothing in it that even vaguely resembles or could be interpreted as a bird. The only element of the painting that made its way to Thomas’s poem is the

\[49\] See above, Chapter 1 “Faith and Experience” (42 n.27).
\[50\] See above, Chapter 3 “People in Experience” (110).
\[51\] Cf. Shepherd (44).
cathedral itself, and its building material. In going “inside,” the speaker signals that he is entering not only the building but, most importantly, the realm of imagination – and, by the same token, leaving the world of Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral, Full Sunshine*. The experience of art links with and gives way to other experiences – of prayer and being in a church, of meditation, of silence, as well as watching birds.

Let us now close our discussion by taking a look at Thomas’s first poem on a work of visual art, from the 1946 volume *The Stones of the Field*. The text deserves some commentary, for it is not only overlooked by critics, but it also crowns the poet’s departures from ekphrasis, providing a good balancing point for this chapter’s opening with “*Guernica*. Pablo Picasso.”52 The verse takes for its topic a portrait from 1932 of the Irish writer Joseph Hone (1882–1959), by the famous Welsh artist, draughtsman and etcher, Augustus John.53

Augustus John *Joseph Hone*

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52 While Rehder notes the existence of “On a Portrait of Joseph Hone” among the early examples of ekphrasis in Thomas’s poetry (83), he does not venture into a discussion of the poem. One study to have considered Thomas’s poem in question in closer detail, is George D. Raitt’s Masters thesis *Alchemy and Ambiguity*. Raitt’s approach, however, is essentially a philosophy-based one, relying on Heidegger and Peirce as providers of the theoretical frame.

53 Tate Gallery leaflet explains that Hone (1882-1959) was “an old friend” of John’s, “a distinguished Irish biographer, best remembered for a biography of his friend and contemporary, the poet W.B. Yeats.” Hone is also noted for his role in Irish Literary Revival.
Although we know that the painting was exhibited in Wales in 1935 (Chamot et al. 332), we do not know for certain if Thomas saw it there, as he was silent on the matter. There certainly is no allusion to any background information about the painting in the poem itself. The speaker does not reveal any familiarity with the painting’s history, location, or position within the history of art. Artistic technique is also ignored. Indeed, there is no accompanying reproduction of it in the book, and only the title informs us that the poem is based on the canvas. Already, at the first glimpse, it becomes evident that, unlike many contemporary examples of ekphrasis, the nucleus of “On a Portrait of Joseph Hone” is not the portrait itself so much as the human figure portrayed.

As though the brute eyes had seen
In the hushed meadows the weasel,
That would tear the soft down of the throat
And suck the veins dry
Of their glittering blood.

And the mouth formed to the cry,
That gushed from the cleft heart
And flowed coldly as spring water over
The stone lips.

(CP 15)

Thus the poem opens with a comment on Hone’s eyes. As I have just pointed out, the speaker’s attention is not on technique, and he chooses to ignore colour, shape, or verisimilitude. Instead, he “describes” the model’s eyes with reference to things

54 The exhibition was titled Contemporary Welsh Art, and was staged in two places: in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, in July and August 1935, and at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, where the paintings were moved in October that year. Although it remains uncertain whether Thomas saw any of these exhibitions, it is by no means impossible, considering that at the time he began his studies at St Michael’s Theological College in Llandaff, “just outside the city of Cardiff” (Rogers 99). The only reproduction of the painting until 1949 was in John Rothenstein’s book Augustus John (plate 54). On the other hand, Thomas never mentioned seeing the exhibition, and admitted his reliance on reproductions as far as the later volumes are concerned (Ned Thomas and Barnie 45). We know that the poet’s wife, Elsi, who was a painter, complained about his failure to see the originals (Rogers 270).

55 Cf.: “In one sense, the whole collection of ekphrastic poetry treated in this book can be seen as a museum of words – a gallery of art constructed by language alone. But the metaphor gains a special resonance in this century, when ekphrastic poems typically evoke actual museums of art along with the words they offer us: the whole complex of titles, curatorial notes, and art historical commentary that surround the works of art we now see on museum walls” (Heffernan 8).
apparently irrelevant, conspicuously absent from the canvas, and not obviously connected with its subject.

A small but dangerous predator, the weasel is commonly believed to enjoy sucking and feeding on blood; and it is this predatory character that the speaker emphasises. One realises this when looking at the weasel’s actions (“tear[ing] the soft down of the throat,” “suck[ing] the veins dry / Of . . . blood” in the meadows), the motifs of the “cry” (of another creature being killed?), of the “cleft heart,” and of the “stone” (that is, dead and cold?) lips. All these point to the character of the scene “as though” seen by the portrayed writer. The context of this strikingly brutal situation casts some light on the epithet “brute” characterising his eyes. Connoting bestiality, the epithet suggests the onlooker’s identification, in a sense, with what he is looking at: it implies that witnessing an animal feeding on the sustaining blood arouses a similar desire in the observer. Resemblance between the weasel and Hone might perhaps be noticed in the latter’s elongated, weasel-like face. The question thus arises: whose blood is the writer after? Or, to put it somewhat differently, what other desire does Hone’s metaphorical thirst for blood represent?

The second stanza continues the hunt motif through the “cry” that “gushed” (like blood?) from the “cleft heart” and through the suggestion of coldness (“coldly,” “stone lips”) – all indicating the victim’s death. The word “cry” acquires two senses in the poem. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, it is the shriek of the prey as it is being killed. Secondly, having “gushed” from the “cleft” (torn?) heart, the cry bears resemblance to blood spilled by the ferocious hunter.

However, the stanza also employs new imagery, and its vocabulary and phrasing carry new associations. The simile “cry . . . as spring water” introduces another equivalence. “Spring water” gushing from “cleft stone” brings to mind Moses’ striking of the desert rock to quench the Israelites’ thirst (Exodus 17:2). How does that thirst for water link with the craving for blood mentioned in the first stanza?\(^{56}\) How do both of them relate to the fact that it is neither of them but the “cry” which actually “gushed from the cleft heart” – although “stone lips” can also be metaphorically “silent” as the “mouth” is not crying but only “formed to the

\(^{56}\) Cf. similar imagery in “Montrose”: “His red blood was the water of life” (CP 301).
cry”? The cry is not there (because painting is mute?). There is no blood either as the “cleft heart” does not bleed but cries, and anyway the weasel has “suck[ed] the veins dry” already. Nor can we find the water there, as it is the “heart” which is “cleft,” not the rock. At the risk of oversimplification, in the complex network of all those puzzling equivalences and suggestions, the painting itself and its model Joseph Hone move out of focus: it is the poem’s stream of associations – advancing in its own directions – which is of importance.

Since the beginnings of human life on earth, everyday observation made people realise the direct connection between blood, on the one hand, and life and death on the other (Meyer 2). Even if the specific understanding of this connection varied across cultures, the universal salience of blood as a sign of life and/or death is beyond question. For Israelites, blood was divine because it stood for life (McCarthy 176 and passim). Similar connotations apply to water, which is ordinarily perceived as a source of life and as a saving power (Kingsley 1-3). For Christianity, it represents Christ the Saviour or, in other words, the one who gives Life Eternal (Kingsley 4 and passim). This “water of life” is often referred to as “springing,” just as in John 4:10-4:14:

If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water. . . . Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life [emphasis mine].

Due to their sacred character, water and blood are traditional signs for the Eucharist and the vita eaterna that it offers (Gurewich 359). Might the thirst for

57 Cf. “Ann Griffith” [sic]: “I thirst, I thirst / for the spring water. Draw it up / for me from your heart’s well” (CP 281).
58 For an overview of scholarly positions on the meaning of blood in various cultures, see Dennis J. McCarthy “Symbolism of Blood,” and Melissa L. Meyer Thicker than Water.
59 Cf.: “Only be sure that thou eat not the blood: for the blood is the life; and thou mayest not eat the life with the flesh” (Deuteronomy 12:23); “For the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Leviticus 17:11).
60 Cf. the same fragment in another translation: “But those who drink the water that I will give them will never become thirsty again. In fact, the water I will give them will become in them a spring that gushes up to eternal life” [emphasis mine] (God’s Word Translation). Cf. also “The Fisherman” by Thomas: “I could have told of the living water / That springs pure” (CP 190).
blood that is water, in Thomas’s poem, represent a thirst for such eternal life, available through Jesus Christ?

In “On a Portrait of Joseph Hone,” the blood that is water is “glittering” like a gem. Thus it brings to mind the promise of New Jerusalem,

that great city . . . and her light was like unto a stone most precious . . . And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof . . . And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. (Revelation 21:10-22:1)

“Cleft heart” does carry associations with Christ’s side pierced by the soldier’s spear on Golgotha. But, mysteriously, “cleft” heart is also a “cracked” heart, a heart of “rock” – hard and dry as the desert crags of Horeb. A heart silently crying for – what? For death (as suggested by the first stanza and the adjective “cleft”), and for life eternal?

All these suggestions make the poem quite enigmatic, as they are never finally clarified and never cohere into a whole. The text never reveals what prompts the poet to interpret Hone’s eyes as “brute” or to imagine him as seeing a weasel. It never explains whose cry (the animal’s?) is formed in whose mouth (Hone’s?), or why the cry is like water. It owes its problematic unity entirely to the dominating equivalence between the protagonist and the weasel, both hungering for the precious blood and the life it offers. The poem turns out to be an expression of a desire – not necessarily that of the portrayed man, and not obviously that of the speaker – of the hidden lyrical “I.” It reveals its lyrical character as an extremely generalized utterance. In a manner similar to “Monet: Rouen Cathedral, Full Sunshine,” the poem directly spells out its departure from the aim of representation in favour of a highly subjective treatment of the visual material. Here, the role of such an “announcement” is conferred upon the phrase “as though,” right at the poem’s beginning. And this is most significant for our considerations, for the speaker informs us here that he does not describe the

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*On the tradition of interpreting the spear wound (in John 19:34) as referring to Christ’s heart, see Gurewich.*
poetry on understood unique In associations, “reproduction,” Therefore, Augustus expectation equivalences. 

The departure from particularising description is clearly visible both in the treatment and in the choice of the elements from the painting. I have already pointed out that the speaker ignores painterly qualities, confining his attention instead to the model’s body. But even then, its depiction in the poem differs from John’s. For instance, the “mouth formed to the cry” does not agree with the canvas, where Hone’s mouth is only slightly open. Indeed, the Tate Gallery exhibition brochure sees the portrait as far from reflecting any brutality, aggressiveness, or violence. Proposing that Hone’s eyes have a “dreamy” expression, the brochure endorses Michael Holroyd’s view of Hone as “an Irishman of impressive silence.”

Not only does the speaker deviate from that view in his interpretation of Hone’s facial expression, but he also departs from the painting in at least one more respect. Namely, not all of the “described” body parts – that is, the eyes, the throat, the veins and the blood, the mouth, the lips, and the heart – can actually be seen in the painting. Moreover, most of them appear in a strongly metaphorical context. The “description” of the protagonist is clearly functional, subordinated to poetic equivalences. The verse is only loosely connected to John’s portrait. Our expectation of an internal adequacy between the visual representation of Hone by Augustus John and what should be the latter’s verbal representation, is frustrated. Therefore, the poem can hardly be taken for a “description,” “re-creation,” “reproduction,” or even an “interpretation” of the canvas. Selecting elements from that painting for the purpose of metaphor, equivalence, and suggestive associations, the text falls out of the canon of ekphrasis in a variety of ways: it does not use the technique of ekphrasis, nor is it an ekphrasis in the genological sense. In this study, it emerges not just as an ekphrastic poem, but above all as a poem – a unique work of art. As such, it proves that art is never entirely bound by canonically understood systemic phenomena or conventions.

The present study has investigated the experience of art in Thomas’s poems on paintings, from “Guernica. Pablo Picasso” to “On a Portrait of Joseph Hone,” a poem conspicuously independent of its seeming inspiration. As can be expected
with poetry, each text situates itself differently with respect to the technique of ekphrasis. Nonetheless, one could draw here on Rehder’s comment that “[a] number of the poems are clearer if one knows the paintings, but for the majority, it makes surprisingly little difference” (85). As the Australian poet Peter Steele once observed, a “poet may be both captivated and stimulated by the outcome on the canvas. . . . Works of art can enlist us, but they can also unleash us, and the resulting poetry may bear the marks of both processes” (Whispering Gallery 12). The above interpretations have attempted to unveil how this poetic independence is realised, by highlighting the internal laws of each poem as a structural whole. Irrespective of the extent of each poem’s reliance on ekphrastic description, poetic utterance reveals itself as a unique work of verbal art, governed above all by the artistic ordering of its supercode.

Thus it is the given text’s own inimitable organisation which dictates its recourse to motifs from the source painting and its treatment of them. On numerous occasions, the verse’s rooting in the work of visual art takes place mainly through the title. There is never a guarantee that a given detail will find a place in the associated poem. If it does, it frequently undergoes a modification, as poems on de Chirico or on Shahn have strikingly shown. By the same token, motifs absent from the painting are often penned into Thomas’s verse – some of them agreeing at least roughly with the subject matter of the canvas (as was the case with thirst and alcohol in the poem on van den Berghe), but some not necessarily so (the weasel in “On the Portrait of Joseph Hone,” for instance). An important factor in Thomas’s selection of source motifs seems to be the semantic potential of a term (as was the case, for instance, with the book and mind in a poem on The Child’s Brain, or the bicycle in “The Good Inn. Frits van den Berghe”). The poet seems to perceive such

62 Rehder’s opinion, however, positions itself in striking contrast with Ward’s postulate that “[t]he paintings energize and fire the poems, and the poems are limp and lifeless without them” (131). The Welsh scholar’s is a conclusion natural enough from his observation that “[b]ecause Impressionism captures appearance” and consequently “is an art not of ideas, or even of harmonious balance, but of colour and light,” Thomas’s “experience [is] of the painting as colour” (131). Similarly, on Helen Vendler’s view, the poems cannot be understood without the attached reproductions, even though the critic admits that “many aspects of the paintings go unmentioned in the poetry; the poems do not refer to genre, dimension, colour, brushwork, or art-historical allusion in the painting” (57).
motifs primarily as words – as signs endowed with certain meanings or triggering certain associations.

One phenomenon which attracts attention in Thomas’s poems on paintings is his approach to sound orchestration. Since it involves moving across two different “languages,” so to speak, a verbal description of the visual artwork could be perceived as a task akin to “translation.” Any poetic attempt to render the painting’s colour, texture, and other visual qualities must take place through words and their patterning in a text. One might expect that the aural aspect of a poetic utterance is also harnessed to this aim. It is not so, however, in Thomas’s case. Instead, sound in his verse is subordinate to poetic equivalence (contributing, for instance, to the protagonist’s identification with an apple in the poem on Mademoiselle Dihau). Likewise, rarely is graphical layout manipulated to render the traits of the painterly work. Admittedly, Thomas makes use of graphic design in “Guernica. Pablo Picasso.” In other poems, however, division into lines is not governed by aims akin to George Herbert’s so-called “pattern poems,” but rather by enjambment and the semantic enrichment enabled by this device. Allowing the poet to insert a single word into two different contexts – that of a line and that of a sentence – the tension between syntax and verse constitutes one of Thomas’s key recipes for expanding the semantic field of a word or phrase.

For Thomas, significantly, expression of an experience of visual art involves leaning on multifarious senses of a single word, senses which are drawn from the natural language and/or suggested through a broad range of poetic means such as enjambment, simile, metaphor, repetition, or parallelism. While pretending to describe the painting, particular motifs cooperate simultaneously with other signs and elements of the text (here, the epithet “mahogany-toned” from “Degas: Mademoiselle Dihau at the Piano” comes to mind), thereby contributing to the poem’s own structural network. As is the case with his reflections on Degas’ picture of the pianist, or on the same painter’s Musicians in the Orchestra, Thomas’s poems are often dominated by one key equivalence, harnessing a range of subordinate tropes and devices to its service. Thomas’s “interpretation” develops figuratively and by semantic enrichment – and thus in a manner which increases the distance from the painting.
As faithfulness to the fine-art source diminishes, other repertories for metaphor and association encroach. Experiences other than those of art signal their appearance – such as the feeling of thirst, or insights relating to the relationship between a man and a woman. Throughout his poems on various canvases, Thomas makes art his locus of experience; but, although always the first one, it is not necessarily the most important one.

**Well-Strung Harp**

However significant paintings are for Thomas, they are not the only art form explored in his oeuvre. Although they do not add up to as impressive a number, poems on music are also a notable part of his oeuvre, as we will see in the last section of this chapter. “String by string, there is weaving to be done,” concludes Steele’s “David” (*Whispering Gallery* 43), alluding to a Biblical story depicting music’s power (from 1 Samuel 16:14-16:27). In this section, I am going to examine that power’s hold on the poet’s imagination. But verse has always been imaged as a song, and poets continue to be called birds, or bards. It seems only right that a discussion of Thomas’s poetry should also entail a look at his own – to keep to “David” – “well-strung harp.” In other words, my task at hand is to find out how the poet “weaves” his poetic responses to music.

Surprisingly, Thomas’s verse dealings with music continue to receive little scholarly recognition, with the relevant commentary mostly limited to brief remarks on particular poems. Amongst these, “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” (CP 470-75) seems to have attracted the most attention. A more extensive analysis of that tribute to one of Wales’ most famous hymn-writers is carried out by Fflur Dafydd in “‘There were fathoms in her too:’ R.S. Thomas and Women.” The critic takes up as her focal point Thomas’s admiring orientation towards the protagonist, as opposed to his harsh treatment of other female characters in the volume *Welsh Airs* (1987), where the poem first appeared. Dafydd argues that one factor influencing this
distinction lies in his perception of Ann as representative of a “rural haven” which stood firmly against English colonisation (125). Adopting a gender-studies perspective, Dafydd’s observations also lead her to agree with Tony Brown that “this one female whom R.S. Thomas perceives not as a threat but as achieving spiritual insight, an authentic self, is . . . seen in terms of the iconography of masculine selfhood” (“Identity and Gender” 14). In “Keeping His Pen Clean: R.S. Thomas and Wales,” M. Wynn Thomas, in turn, assesses Thomas’s celebratory imaging of the Methodist mystic “as a spirit in rapture and a pilgrim soul” (76) which is “slightly reminiscent of the one offered by Saunders Lewis” (77).

While critical debates tackle the poet’s attitude to his protagonist, the problem of his poetic approach to the fugue itself has so far been overlooked. In the following discussion I want to take a deeper look at “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” with respect to its relationship with that musical convention. In pursuing this goal, I will, where relevant, set the text alongside several of Thomas’s other poems relating to music. I will also put forward some general propositions as to the possible trends which mark them. The observations that follow do not by any means claim to be exhaustive, but rather aim to indicate potential paths for further exploration. With these reservations in mind, let us take a closer look at the text in question.

The poem takes for its subject the figure of Ann Griffiths, one of Wales’ leading female poets. She was born Ann Thomas, in 1776, on a farm called Dolwar Fach in Montgomeryshire. From childhood, she took an active part in the bustling cultural life of the community. At the age of twenty Ann joined the local Methodist seiat. The poetess is also known for the intense passion which characterised her spiritual experiences and her writing. In 1804 she married Thomas Griffiths; she died the following year, aged 29, giving birth to a child. She left some 30 hymns (73 stanzas), which according to E. Wyn James “contain some of the great Christian poetry of Europe.”69

69 The above biographical summary is based on E. Wyn James’s “Introduction to Life and Work of Ann Griffiths” for Cardiff University’s Ann Griffiths Website. For more information, see the above website.
Atypically of the usually terse poet, Thomas’s “music poems” often spread out over as many as five pages. “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” is no different in this respect. It is composed in eleven parts, each of which forms a quasi-poem on its own, each distinct from other sections in terms of versification and graphical layout. Serving as an introduction of sorts, the first part of the poem hints at the poem’s background. More specifically, the situation which provoked the utterance appears to be a visit to Griffiths’ abode, Dolwar Fach, suggested through the mention of “home,” combined with the demonstrative and descriptive comments “There it is, / as she left it,” “down this path,” and “under the eaves the martins . . .” [emphases mine]. These are completed later with references to other nearby locations – such as the Efyrnwy and Dolanog – on the so-called Ann Griffiths Walk, a tourist route across landscapes which inspired the hymn-writer.

The speaker conceives of the experience not only geographically: for him, the two categories of space and time are imposed on each other. In other words, the visit takes the sightseer into the past:

In which period
do you get lost?
The roads lead
under a twentieth century
sky to the peace
of the nineteenth. There it is,
as she left it,
too small to be chrysalis
of that clenched soul.
Under the eaves the martins
continue her singing.

(CP 470)

Making use of graphical parallelism, the quoted passage underlines the opposition between the “twentieth-century” and “the nineteenth,” which also puts the associated “sky” and “peace” at variance. The implied suggestion is that currently

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64 Indeed, the last (eleventh) part returns to the equivalence, speaking directly of “the union of time with space” (CP 474).

65 Seeing as the hymnist lived mostly in the late eighteenth century, Thomas seems to concern himself with time at the end of Griffiths’ life.
there is some kind of agitation in the firmament. Perhaps this suggestion can better be understood in light of the rest of the poem.

The contraposition of the (superior) past with the (worse-off) present is remodelled in the second section, and expanded into a dichotomy between the two qualities of being “fenced in” and “open,” with “cables and pylons” standing, synecdochically, for all kinds of closure as well as, metonymically, for controversial achievements of contemporary technology. Parts six and eight of the poem cast a slightly different light on the prior “peace” and its current violations. More specifically, the era of Griffiths was the period

... before
the bomb, before the annihilation
of six million Jews

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

The contemporary miracle is the feeding
of the multitude on the sublime
mushroom, while the Jesus,
who was her lover, is a face
gathering moss on the gable
of a defunct chapel

(CP 473)

The metaphor directs us here to the Gospel’s two accounts of Christ feeding the multitude by multiplying bread before he reaches the vicinity of Magadan and near Bethsaida. In referring to the stories, the poet plays on the binary sense of “mushroom” as food and as the common designation for the cloud of smoke, debris and condensed water forming after the detonation of bombs. Making the sky here a stage for post-explosion chaos, the speaker harks back to and develops the earlier suggestion of the sky’s lack of “peace.”

The theme of war determines also the poem’s sixth part, in its entirety. Awarded two meanings, the word “war” stands for nineteenth-century moral crusades (“If there was a campaign, it was one / against sin,” “they were conscripted” but “musically”), as well as concomitantly signifying absurd military

66 Cf. “Manafon”: “their skies noisy with armed aircraft” (R 35).
conflicts of the present day: “wars that were to end / war.” The motif is inscribed here not only in a comparison of the two moments in history (initiated in the poem’s first part), but also in a complementary contradistinction between the protagonist’s motherland and England, with the latter country characterised by “hostilities.” Stressing how the mystic willingly gave herself up to serving the Deity, the paradox of “[t]hough a prisoner of the Lord / she was taken without fighting” functions to underscore the non-violent nature of Ann’s times.

As can be seen in the above analysis, the poet develops his main topic (the historical figure named Ann Griffiths) largely by way of opposition and contrast. Paradox fulfils a role in this strategy, as does the adversative conjunctive “though” itself, or the simple practice of summoning antonyms (such as “war” and “peace,” appearing in two consecutive lines in the sixth part’s second stanza). It seems that, although the poem announces itself as “homage” to Ann Griffiths and is replete with biographical allusion, the applied technique of contrast foregrounds a certain thematic tension: it is telling of the speaker’s underlying modus operandi, which is to set the nineteenth-century hymn-writer as a benchmark against which to offer a poetic “diagnosis” of the problems harrowing contemporary society. Adopting such a tack on the subject allows the poet to interweave other concomitant topics, along with many of his frequent motifs, equivalences and metaphorical themes, into the fabric of his utterance.

Amongst the figurative themes popular with Thomas is the one which links the protagonist with a ship, combined with the complementary equivalence between human life and a sea-voyage. It can be found in section four of “Fugue for Ann Griffiths,” which features metaphors such as “her face, figure-head of a ship” and “her harbours,” as well as the simile “she kept on course / like one apprenticed . . . to the difficulty of navigation / in rough seas.” While the sea imagery in this particular poem may be one of its allusions to Griffith’s work, as

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67 Cf.: “The immediate consequence of Ann’s attending Methodist meetings was to intensify her consciousness of being far from God and unable to meet his standards and, as a result, of being under his just condemnation” (James).
Dafydd and Jason Walford Davies propose, Thomas certainly uses imagery here which is to recur often in his poems on other people.  

Take also the protagonist’s relationship with the natural world, a theme possibly explained by the fact that Griffiths was a farmer’s daughter, but equally a theme familiar already from Thomas’s “peasant poems.” This is a fragment from part four, asking about education versus naturalness:

Is there a scholarship that grows
naturally as the lichen? How
did she, a daughter of the land, come
by her learning?

(CP 471)

Part seven provides another stage for the theme’s reappearance – for instance, through the metaphor “your grass library” (CP 473), which intimates a similarity between gaining knowledge and experiencing the natural world in a manner reaching back to Romantic “readings” of nature.

One could also recall here the widespread metaphorical triangle of man, soil, and tree, coming up in this poem almost as insistently as it does across Thomas’s oeuvre. In part seven, the metaphor of “Christ rising in April / out of that same soil and clothing / his nakedness like a tree” draws from the above triple identification, while also enriching it with copious additional suggestions, from the one of spring, through the associated one of the Resurrection, to that of Adam in Eden (our forefather being a man risen out of the dust of the earth, and covering his “nakedness” after gaining the forbidden knowledge of the apple). “Rising” is important functionally in supporting this suggestive range for it displays three distinct meanings here, pertaining to Christ’s coming back from the dead,

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68 Dafydd views the poem as influenced by “Griffiths’s constant use of maritime imagery within her hymns, referring often to God as a navigator of some kind” (“Women” 126). Jason Walford Davies, in turn, argues that it is indebted specifically to her “Bererin Llesg Gan Rym y Stromydd” (79). Thomas’s employment of the ship-at-sea imagery has been discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis (“People in Experience” 106-107, 115 n.27).
69 “Let nature be your teacher,” Wordsworth postulates famously in “The Tables Turned” (Wordsworth and Coleridge 149).
70 The poet’s figurative identifications linking the human being, a tree and the earth have been covered in greater detail in the preceding chapter of this thesis, dealing with “People in Experience” (107-109).
designating a tree’s growth, and denoting the creation of man. In the metaphor, the poet upgrades the ubiquitous Thomasion equivalence of man-tree-earth by embracing the Son of Man.

Part of this equivalence is then perpetuated in “defoliated man” later in the same section, as well as resurfacing in the elaborate metaphor of “your belief crucified upon” a tree of “the deciduous human body” (from section five):

If you came in winter,
    you would find the tree
with your belief still crucified
    upon it, that for her at all
times was in blossom, the resurrection
    of one that had come seminally
down to raise the deciduous human
    body to the condition of his body.

(CP 472)

Here, the human form participates in another transmutation of the equivalence, which joins it with a tree as well as with that specific form of the tree which is the Cross. Thomas transforms the biblical story, metonymically substituting for Christ the faith that He stands for, as well as transposing the pain onto the believer. Crucifixion and Resurrection become metaphors for two contrary states, the suffering inherent in a reality which sacrificed (“crucified”) belief on the one hand, and the flourishing of Ann’s spiritual life (the metaphor of a tree “in blossom”) on the other. In the context of “resurrection” and the permanence of the “blossom,” the seasons work as single-word figurative signs designating the two conditions respectively.

To give one final example of how this metaphorical theme is realised in different parts of the poem, one could mention the motif of a “green” versus a leafless tree, from section ten:

Are the Amens over? Ann (Gymraeg)
you have gone now but left us with the question
that has a child’s simplicity and a child’s depth:
Does the one who called to you,

when the tree was green, call us
also, if with changed voice,
now the leaves have fallen and the boughs
are of plastic, to the same thing?

(CP 474)

In this passage, the “green tree” appears as a variation on “the tree . . . in blossom” from the fifth part, as it possesses associations with the spring, is linked with the past, and is presented in disparity with “now the leaves have fallen.” At the same time, the metaphor “now . . . the boughs are of plastic” confers upon the “green tree” the sense of virgin, organic purity.

The poem binds together many of Thomas’s motifs, themes, equivalences and metaphorical repertories, of which I have only highlighted a few. Moreover, particular themes return to undergo diverse re-interpretations throughout the entire text. Similarly, single motifs and even phrasings recur and resurface, sometimes expressis verbis (as did the “tree,” “scholarship,” or “blossom”), and sometimes modified (with “a daughter of the land” from part four turning into “a daughter of the soil” in part eight).

The poem’s multiplicity of themes is reflected in its division into eleven parts, each of which is written differently, in terms of versification, forming on its own a semi-independent entity. The range of patterns embraces irregular couplets (part three), vers libre (part two, for instance), quatrains (parts five and ten), as well as tercets (part six).

In developing through variations on several intertwined themes, as well as in addressing these themes through a number of discrete compositional units, the poem manifests the formative influence of the fugue convention that it announces in its title.71 Granted that each of the diverse stanzaic patterns fulfils the role of the so-called “voice,” it can be said that their variety shapes the whole of the utterance as a “polyphony” of sorts. The speaker’s repetitions of the phatic “listen,” in

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71 For The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music, the fugue is a “type of contrapuntal composition in which particular no. of parts or ‘voices’ (described thus whether vocal or instr) enter successively in imitation of each other, the 1st v. entering with a short melody or phrase known as the subject” (Kennedy). Merriam Webster online dictionary defines fugue as “a musical composition in which one or two themes are repeated or imitated by successively entering voices and contrapuntally developed in a continuous interweaving of the voice parts” (“fugue,” def.).
variants – “To put it differently / yet the same, listen, / friend” (CP 470) and “Listen again” (CP 471) – after parts one and two, seem also to originate in the musical convention, bearing resemblance as they do to the connective codetta. In “Fugue for Ann Griffiths,” Thomas clearly considered music in terms of the compositional opportunities it provided for his poetic utterances.

Similar notions of a musical genre underlie an uncollected poem entitled “Sonata in X” (UP 91-93), which follows the common practice of dividing the sonata into four movements. Outlining the history of the Creation, Thomas resorts to quartering the poem into Allegro, Andante, Scherzo and Adagio to render that history as musica universalis, “a huge music, [God] himself the player / of it, and its composer” (UP 91).

The above remarks focused on Thomas’s “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” and “Sonata in X” with respect to how these poems adopted, for their own purposes, the compositional principles offered by a musical convention. A word could also be said here about the poet’s assortment of these conventions. In “Border Blues” (CP 69-72), the choice seems dictated by the aim of poetic ambiguity, with Thomas playing on the double meaning of “blues” as a type of music and as feelings of sadness (here, over the troubles plaguing Wales). Given that the protagonist of “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” was an author of hymns (a genre normally destined to be chanted), and considering the poem’s recurrent motifs of singing and dancing, the decision to speak about her by way of emulating music seems perhaps natural. The question, however, remains of why Thomas exploited the fugue in particular.

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72 Codetta “leads to another entry or series of entries of the subject, and so on until the end of the piece, entries and episodes alternating” (Kennedy).
73 For a more detailed scholarly commentary on “Border Blues” (CP 69-72) and how it speaks of the Welsh culture as dying out and losing itself to the colonising English, see Jason Walford Davies (85-87).
74 Thomas consistently associates the hymnist with music, as the presence of music motifs also in another poem on her, “Ann Griffith” [sic] (CP 281), seems to suggest. “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” alludes to her work, with “the Bridegroom was waiting for her on her way,” as Jason Walford Davies points out, sending us back to one of Ann’s hymns, “Wele’n Sefyll Rhwng y Myrtywdd” (“There he stands among the myrtles”) (79). Apart from the simple fact of her being a hymn-writer, a motivating background for Ann’s bond with dancing motifs in the poem may be the stories of Ann’s bouts of intense mystical joy and spiritual passion, as well as her liking for that amusement. The Cardiff University website describes Griffiths as “very much at home in the merry-making which characterised the fairs and wakes and informal evening entertainment of her day, and she was especially fond of dancing” (James).
seems that the source of this selection may lie in the fugue being one of music’s major conventions. Its use forms part of the celebratory attitude adopted in the examined poem, and it aims to carry across the importance of the topic.\textsuperscript{75}

Likewise, the choice of musical genre underpinning “Sonata in X” seems to be influenced by the nature of that genre as complex, large-scale, and historically significant. Certainly, the poem gives that impression as it confronts the ambitious, fundamental topic of man’s relationship with the Deity over the ages. The symbol “X” also plays an important role here. It signals departure from music itself even though the whole title pretends to follow the convention of advising about the musical scale – a convention present, for instance, in the title of Mozart’s \textit{The Piano Sonata No. 16 in C major}.\textsuperscript{76} This divergence is perhaps clearest in another of Thomas’s poems bearing the same title “Sonata in X,” the one closing \textit{Mass for Hard Times}, where it is accompanied by the mathematical expression \(1^{32} \times \sqrt{-1}\) (MHT 84). In as much as it is used in algebra for designating an unknown, the letter “X” points to aspirations of both poems to confront certain “mysteries” besetting human existence, rather than indicating musical qualities.\textsuperscript{77}

The poems’ titles – “Fugue for Ann Griffiths,” “Sonata in X,” “Border Blues” – reveal that Thomas did not usually write on the experience of listening to particular tunes, even if his familiarity with compositional nuances of the sundry musical genres indicates that he probably took some interest in (mostly classical?) music.\textsuperscript{78} As the author of “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” himself specifies, when opening section seven of the poem, his words are intended “to do her homage” (CP 472), not

\textsuperscript{75} Fugue has traditionally represented the sophisticated musical genres. As Erwin Ratz claims, “fugal technique significantly burdens the shaping of musical ideas, and it was given only to the greatest geniuses, such as Bach and Beethoven, to breathe life into such an unwieldy form and make it the bearer of the highest thoughts” (qtd. in Gislason 124).

\textsuperscript{76} Cf. Westover (\textit{Stylistic Biography} 158-59).

\textsuperscript{77} Thus, the speaking voice in \textit{Mass for Hard Times}’ “Sonata in X” complains: “There was something I was near / and never attained: a pattern, / an explanation” (82). The ambition in question is also perceivable in section eight of the poem, asking about one such problem (“Does the tune exist / when the instruments are / silent?”) and stating our impossibility to “solve that” (MHT 83).

\textsuperscript{78} In the interview with Barnie, Thomas informs us: “I am too fond of music to say that my affinity for visual art exceeds it. . . . I graduated through Italian opera to chamber music, especially Beethoven, Schubert, Mozart. I do not understand contemporary music technically, so tend to prefer earlier. . . . I like now polyphony, Mozart’s operas, and Schubert’s songs” (Ned Thomas and Barnie 46).
to verbally describe a given melody or his impression of it. Even if we were to admit the applicability of the term to poems on music, one cannot speak of their indebtedness to the ekphrastic technique in Thomas’s case. It is perhaps for this reason that his “music poems” do not display a significant degree of sound ordering, a degree more pronounced than his other texts. It seems that, ironically, they are not really on the experience of music, being instead poetic ruminations on other topics. Thomas’s reception of music seems not so much sensuous as intellectual, in the sense that for him the crucial factor is the compositional complexity rendering an intricacy of thought.

In this chapter, I have examined Thomas’s poetic technique in conveying the experience of art, particularly of painting and music, the two art forms most notably present in his œuvre. Their descriptive quality has mostly been explored with the view to illuminating the artistic nuances of the poet’s approach. By way of concluding this discussion, one could ask why he wrote ekphrastically-oriented verse on specific canvases, but did not embark on an analogous task of writing about particular works of music. One possible reason lies in the different nature of the two arts. It seems that, in Thomas’s eyes, visual art is a quasi-semantic phenomenon, from which he draws motifs and themes to develop his own reflection. By contrast, a musical piece fails to be semantic, remaining for the poet – as the common appellation for it bespeaks – primarily a “composition.” Whether it be an experience of the painterly motif as bestowed with poetic potential, or an experience of music as an organisational model, for the poet the experience of art is always above all an experience of poetry.
Conclusion

Thomas’s poetry seems to compel a high level of critical interest; however, that interest has only been partial, limited mostly to thematic issues, and more often than not leaving matters of artistry beyond its scope. The present study has addressed that omission. Starting with an understanding of poetry as a verbal art, the preceding chapters present an overview of Thomas’s strategies of poetic expression. My concluding remarks offer some commentary on his poetics in general, with further reflections on his place within the literary tradition. I would like to stress from the outset that these are by no means exhaustive; in fact, one could observe that closure brings home the boundaries of one’s project. Thus an important part of my discussion here consists in flagging the emergent questions with which future studies will need to grapple.

In all his poems, as we have seen, Thomas leans heavily on (often multiple and complex) equivalence and poetic ambiguity. A cardinal method for the poet to achieve richness of meaning is to expand the semantic field of words and motifs through inserting them in structural relationships with various other words and motifs (and with their mutual relations, in turn, too) throughout the text, or even in other texts. Such cooperation endows them with new suggestions, often also simultaneously activating a number of their senses in the natural language. The poet takes the benefit of words’ polysemy, or of their sound (playing with the resulting onomatopoeic, homophonic and other associations). Neither does he refrain from making use of the possibilities offered by graphical layout and enjambment.

A fundamental role in Thomas’s verse is, however, played by metaphor.¹ His writing is rich in “kinds” of this device, from phrase-short figurative statements, through text-bonding metaphorical themes, to intertextual chain-sequences. For the purposes of further metaphorisation, the trope is often submitted to

¹ Cf. Ward (44 and passim) and Bedient (57-58).
condensation and intensification, processes which multiply the number of equivalences even more. After Aristotle and Dr. Johnson respectively, I.A. Richards foregrounds two features of metaphor: its ability to present “two ideas for one,” and to render two distinct things as similar (“an eye for resemblances”) (95). Thus the founder of “practical criticism” highlights two qualities which are also valid for Thomas: poetic economy, and the metaphor’s tensional nature as it marries two lexemes that would not normally belong together.²

In my study, Thomas’s poetry emerges as perceptibly marked by tensions, with relationships between textual elements often shaped by polarity. Not seldom, the tropes harnessed by the poet unify opposites and contesting categories (such as the abstract and the concrete, or the negative and the positive). As we saw, his rendition of religious experience is substantially organised on the principle of oxymoron, and completed with paradox. Often related to the interplay between abstraction and the tangible, another kind of tension in this verse sets together the particular and the universal. The poet’s usual manner of employing metonymy and his ubiquitous recourse to synecdoche are essential factors here. The former often makes a concrete motif represent an abstract notion – referring to the common nature of a whole class of similar entities – and thereby transforms it into a non-specific phenomenon. We observed this in such cases as the motif of the hill, which tends to connote the difficulty of progressing on one’s (spiritual) path, no matter if there is any guise of localising detail attached. Thus Thomasian metonymy stands, in a sense, close to synecdoche as a means of generalisation: indeed, both seem to combine and cooperate with each other. Moreover, the tension between the particular and the universal in his verse affects not only single motifs but also larger units, such as a text or a group of texts. Owing to the poetry’s repetitive and accumulative strain, often the topic loses the specificity which might otherwise be

² Thus, Bedient observes: “Though metaphor is not essential to poetry, it constitutes nodes, at least in poetry on the beauty of the world, where the purpose of the poem is raised to an electric intensity. . . . Thomas’s poems, pomegranates full of kernels, pack in as much of the infinite beauty of the universe as they can” (58). Cf. Damian Walford Davies comment on Thomas’s punning as “both an aspect of [the poet’s] ‘spareness’ – a pun is language on an economy drive – and, given the polyvocality . . . of the pun, its very opposite; a pun is both frugal and fugued, laconic and Lacanian (“Punster” 150).
attributed to it, and the technique of continuing, ladder-like metaphorisation further strengthens this tendency. Thomas’s poetry is lyrical, personal, based on individual experience; however, that experience is concomitantly accorded a universalised dimension and significance.

The figurative enrichment of meaning in Thomas’s verse does not only exhibit a generalising mould. His expression reveals a view of the world – underpinning all his poetic experience – which is overwhelmingly religious. His poems repeatedly explore religious themes, proceed by way of references and allusions to the Bible, and sometimes even show traces of scriptural stylisation of language (for instance, in employing repetition and parallelism).³ Less patently, perhaps, his imageries are substantially rooted in the Old and New Testaments, or in the writings of important Christian authors and thinkers, such as Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich, St. John of the Cross, or St. Augustine, to name just a few.⁴ Most crucially, however, Thomas’s polysemantic diction embraces meanings which flag a perception of the world in spiritual categories – producing what might be dubbed a “spiritualisation” of experience.⁵ Due to this technique, in other words, owing to an underlying belief in something beyond the physical, his poetics could be, at a pinch, called Platonic. In view of this, it is perhaps misleading to speak of Thomas’s religious verse as distinct from his nature poetry, from his early poetic writings on the farmer, or from any other part of his opus. It can be argued that, in a sense, all his poems are religious, even if that is not always conspicuous.⁶

Of the features which I have noticed in this poetry, many can be counted among the hallmarks of poeticty in general, and therefore perceived as manifestations of the strong poetic quality of Thomas’s verse.⁷ For one thing, the

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³ For more on parallelism and the Scriptures, see James L. Kugel Biblical Poetry.
⁴ For a more extensive overview, see Wintle (410-19). For more on Thomas and Kierkegaard, see Williams.
⁵ As we have noted earlier (Chapter 2 “On Nature” 64 and passim), this spiritualization has attracted abundant commentary, particularly with respect to Thomas’s dealings with the natural world. See e.g. Barry Morgan (33-38), Christopher Morgan (49-83), and Hooker (136 and passim).
⁶ Shepherd devoted a whole book to investigate this point – see her Images of God (esp. 186).
⁷ Cf. David Perkins’s comment on Thomas’s style: “Its virtues are those of good writing of any time – clarity, speed, force, compactness, depth of suggestion and significance” (433). Thomas’s reliance on these basics of poetry is the reason for Perkins’s difficulties with mapping his verse with respect to poetic tradition.
network of mutual co-relations binding the whole text together is what the Prague Structuralists and their academic offspring call intrinsic literary structure. For another, the theoretical lens of New Critics focused on metaphor, tension, paradox and irony as determinants of verse. Nonetheless, as scholars emphasise, we have inherited our current notions of poetry to a large extent from Romanticism, and to a significant extent, illuminatingly, Thomas’s style can be set beside nineteenth-century poetics.

To apprehend the extent of his alignments with Romantic poetry more fully, however, one needs to recognise that nineteenth-century reflections on poetry evolved in close connection with certain theories of language and nature. In a well-known statement from “The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History,” René Wellek identifies the criteria allowing us to speak of Romanticism as a distinct trend in literary history: “imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style” (161). All of these, for the Romantics, are mutually interlocked. For on the Romantic view, “nothing exists in isolation,” but “[a]ll things are related to all things; all things therefore signify all things; each part of the universe mirrors the whole” (A.W. Schlegel, qtd. in Wellek, History 41). Accordingly, poetry was supposed to be “organic,” that is, to reconstruct the unity of nature, to which end it must rely on imagination and on the inherent capacities of poetic language. These capacities include symbolic character. The Romantics believed the ethnic language to be a flawed inheritance of

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8 On this view, literary structure is a term defining the essence of every verbal work of art. “The tradition of the structural model in poetics goes back to Aristotle, to his theory of tragedy based on general principles of his logic and philosophy of science. In the Romantic period, under the influence of organic thinking, the structural model became morphological. Prague School structuralism [merely] initiates the semiotic version of the model” (Selden 42). Major theoretical positions on literary structure include for instance Mukařovsky’s Structure, Sign, and Function or Lotman’s Structure. For more recent authors, see Zgorzelski System i funkcja (18).

9 These inherited notions were often ironically appropriated for attacks on English Romantic poetry. Interesting considerations of contemporary literary studies’ connection to Romantic notions of poeticity include M.H. Abrams’s Correspondent Breeze (110), David Simpson’s “Romanticism” (11-24), and Cyrus Hamlin’s “Temporality of Selfhood” (171-73). For more on the use of the term “poeticity” in this thesis, see above (“Introduction” 14 n.19).

10 Some useful reference and primary works on which the following discussion is based include Wellek’s works “Concept,” History, and Rise, Abrams’s Mirror and Lamp and Correspondent Breeze, as well as Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria.

11 For more on the metaphor of the “organic” creativity and the related concepts of the literary work, see for instance Abrams Mirror and Lamp (218-25), or Stempel “Coleridge and Organic Form.”
the hubris of Babel; in contrast, poetry was perceived as returning to the original “ideal” language, in which the sign is a “symbol” of its meaning and thus truly represents its referent.\footnote{As Wellek notes, the idea of the figurative character of man’s first language derives from Lucretius, but, for the Romantics, it was re-invented by August Wilhelm Schlegel in “Theory of Art”; it is from Schlegel that it spread to Coleridge and to the nineteenth-century England (History 40 and 73, Rise 87).}

The Romantic notion of the symbol did not designate a literary trope as much as referring to the nature of the linguistic sign and, specifically, to the relation between the sign and denotatum.\footnote{This at least seems suggested by Thomas McFarland’s analysis in “Involute and Symbol” (esp. 38-44).} In terms of technique, the institution of such “symbolic” language mainly translated into the special status of ambiguity and figurativeness in general, and metaphor in particular, in the poetic practice of the nineteenth century.\footnote{Romantic poets’ prescriptions for verse language included Wordsworth’s injunction to use metaphor and other poetic figures (Wellek, History 134). Coleridge’s view posited “two main techniques of poetry, figurative language and metre” (Wellek, History 167). See also A.W. Schlegel (211).} The importance of metaphor in Romantic poetry is strictly connected to the trope’s unifying capacity.\footnote{In accordance with its “organic” nature, poetry was to evince the “poet’s sensitivity to the most distant relationships” (Wellek, History 41).} As Cyrus Hamlin demonstrates, the Romantic notion of imagination corresponds to the nature of metaphor. Both are inherently synthetic forces: imagination is an “integrating . . . power, which blends, fuses, balances, and reconciles the separate and often opposing parts of a poem into a coherent unity or whole” and, similarly, metaphor works as a coherence-producing “interaction between separate frames of reference in a text” (171).\footnote{Cf. Thomas’s introduction to The Penguin Book of Religious Verse, where the poet directly connects metaphor with the synthesising capacity of imagination: “Now the power of the imagination is a unifying power, hence the force of metaphor; and the poet is the supreme manipulator of metaphor” (64).}

According to Coleridge, a work of art forms “Multëity in Unity” (“Genial Criticism” 372).\footnote{Coleridge further develops this point in a lecture from 1818, titled “On Poesy or Art.” Cf. also Wellek (History 170).} He and his contemporaries recognised thus that the poetic text owes much of its character to internal tension – a tension which also included the conjoining of the material and the spiritual, the intellectual and the sensuous, the
personal and the universal. As Hamlin observes, the Romantic emphasis on subjectivity remains in irrevocable counterpoint to the accompanying generalising tendencies (181). On Wordsworth’s view, “the poet conceives and produces – that is, images – individual forms in which are embodied universal ideas or abstractions” (qtd. in Wellek, History 146). Accordingly, the Romantic poem also aimed at expressing the infinite in the finite medium of language. Much as poets were aware of the impossibility of communing with the Absolute, their poems strived to “break down the barriers between the real and the ideal world” (Wellek, History 75), and concerned themselves with “the kind of experience which traditionally was understood in religious terms, as a revelation” (Hamlin 181). Such tensions in the poetic text spurred Friedrich Schlegel to speak of Romantic “irony,” that is the “recognition of the fact that the world in its essence is paradoxical and that an ambivalent attitude alone can grasp its contradictory totality” (Wellek, History 14).

As we have seen, Thomas’s style can be perceived as having particularly strong roots in Romantic technique and theory of poetry. His thematic preoccupations – synthetically speaking, the partiality for addressing the mystery of existence from a metaphysical perspective, and for seeking the “Truth” about nature, man and their relation to the Eternal Divine – obviously have much in common with nineteenth-century poetry. The Welsh poet is true to Romantic

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18 Thus Coleridge writes in Biographia Literaria: “The poet, described in ideal perfection . . . diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgment ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature” (15-17).
19 For more on this topic, refer also to Westover “Romantic Imagination,” M.P. Markowski “Poesis” (xxxii), or E. Millán-Zaibert “Early German Romanticism” (20-21).
20 For more on Romantic irony, see also Millán-Zaibert (20-21).
21 Thomas’s connection to Romanticism has been mentioned by a number of critics, with major discussions in Westover’s “Romantic Imagination,” Heys’s R.S. Thomas and Romanticism, and Perry’s Chameleon Poet. Yet, the scholarly commentary on this topic reflects the general trends in that it largely eschews the matters of poetics in preference for thematic and biographical interests.
22 In his autobiography “No-One,” Thomas states his purpose as “trying to plumb the mysteries of the creation” (106).
ideals with respect to the tensional character of poetic utterance, to the structural “organic” binding of textual elements, to the status of metaphor and to the overall strategy of maximising figurative ambiguity. Thomas’s intensification of metaphor into a text-cementing phenomenon, or his condensation of a number of experiences into a short phrase can be perceived as strategies performing the imaginative integration posited by Wordsworth and Coleridge. Their theories of the universe as unified, and accordingly of poetry/metaphor as unifying, find a clear reflection in the Welsh poet’s method of depicting nature. Holding the elements – air, earth, water and fire – together, Thomasian metaphor can be apprehended in light of postulates for verse which “might truly achieve the reintegration of the world” (Hamlin 188). Thus “Romantic” does not merely describe the poet’s choice of the natural world as the preferred setting – a constant of Thomas’s poetry happily counted amongst his responses to the nineteenth-century – but also his manner of delineating that setting.

Universalising tendencies in Romantic poetry also shaped its constructions of protagonists, who despite “apparent individualities of rank, character, or occupation must be representative of a class . . . must be clothed with generic attributes” (Coleridge, Biographia Literaria 46). As we have seen, Thomas’s protagonist conforms to Romantic poetics even in this respect. Moreover, the type of characters delineated in his poems – especially the rustic – is repeatedly considered as Wordsworthian. One could add here that the peasant’s language itself seems as important to Thomas as it was for the author of the preface to Lyrical Ballads. While the latter’s professed intention to imitate the peasant’s simple expression – which was supposed to be the essence of poetry – seems to

23 A detailed study of this kind of metaphor in Thomas’s verse can be found in Chapter 2 of this thesis (“On Nature” 73).
24 We can cite here Heys’s R.S. Thomas and Romanticism and Perry’s Chameleon Poet (27-28, 85 and passim) as examples of studies which see Thomas’s natural settings as influenced – amongst other legacies – by his reading of the Romantics.
25 Thus, Coleridge commends the works of Shakespeare and Defoe for offering protagonists who are synecdochic presentations of Everyman, of homo generalis (Wellek, History 173). For him, again, “the characters of [a poem], amid the strongest individualization, must still remain representative” (Biographia Literaria 133).
26 Despite some caveats which concern Thomas’s ways of following his predecessor. See e.g. Heys (66-87), Corcoran (75), or Hooker (128).
have remained mostly within the sphere of intention, it provides for a motif popular with the Welsh poet. Thomas recurrently alludes to Wordsworth’s theory, speaking of farmers’ language as poetry. I have noted that Thomas’s verse is recurrently associated with the pastoral and the related notion of “natural savage,” common two centuries ago. The poet also draws on other conventions popular with the Romantics, such as the ode, bardic poetry, elegy, or dramatic monologue. Finally, among the features that Thomas’s poetry shares with Romantic verse, one could also mention its meditative, pensive character.

As much as Thomas’s Romantic ancestry is one of the most perceptible, it is hardly the sole one. Inevitably, any examination of poetic legacies faces the problem of continuity of historical processes moulding literary fashions. As pointed out by Wellek, many of the traits defining Romantic writings have their sources in earlier times (“Concept” 196). For our purposes, their connectedness with the baroque age seems to be of particular vitality – in the case of an English-speaking priest-poet such as Thomas, specifically the seventeenth-century religious poetry on the British Isles. When discussing Thomas’s “Judgement Day” (CP 105), Ward proposes to take the poem as exhibiting kinship with John Donne, and more generally as expressing thoughts which are “metaphysical in cast,” as well as offering a conceit (43). It seems to me legitimate to expand Ward’s observation more universally to the poet’s oeuvre. As I observed earlier, Thomas’s method of constructing metaphor evokes comparisons to the device championed by the likes of Donne; and certainly the technique of blending opposing elements can be listed.

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27 Wordsworth’s failure to comply with his own postulate in this respect has been commented on by Wellek; the critic also points out the intricacies of Wordsworth’s notions of the “simple” language of “simple” men (History 130-37).
28 Of course, Thomas’s personal “reinterpretation” of Wordsworth’s theory combines with his absorption of Romantic notions of language in general, as well as with his own concepts of the Welsh tongue and national cultural history. More specifically, it is conditioned by his identification of the vernacular speech with the “ideal” figurative language of the times “before” the cultural disaster of Babel-representing English dominion.
29 See above Chapter 2 (“On Nature” 65 and passim) and Chapter 3 (“People in Experience” 127).
30 One can also mention here Thomas’s penchant for the sonnet. This convention was hugely popular with the poets anthologised in Palgrave’s The Golden Treasury, including Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley (Perry, Chameleon Poet 39). From his own comments in Ted Hughes and R.S. Thomas Read and Discuss Selections of Their Own Poems, we know that Thomas identified his poetic origins with this collection. Heys (albeit controversially) puts forward the thesis that Thomas’s poetry is also marked by ballad conventions (95-103).
amongst favourites not only with the Romantics but also with the so-called Metaphysical poets.31 Provoking the comparison even more strongly, this technique significantly relies on paradox, in both Thomas’s and the Metaphysicals’ case.

On many occasions, Thomas declared an intense interest in science and technology, and his diction’s rooting in diverse branches of contemporary human experience has met with much scholarly response.32 In “Problings,” the poet situates his use of technological, physical, medical and other imageries within his understanding of verse as embracing vital aspects of human reality.33 In terms of literary tradition, however, the source for such imagery seems to lie, for Thomas, in the seventeenth century – remarkable as it is for poetry’s saturation with scientific language.34 The poet’s further comments suggest that this lineament can be attributed particularly to his perusal of Donne’s works.35

The influence of seventeenth-century poetry on Thomas’s writing also makes itself felt in his tendency to open the text with a provocative statement (usually directed at the addressee), which is akin to George Herbert’s. Similar legacy can also be found in his careful graphical layout, in so far as “each [poet] employs space as well as text to create meaning” (McGill, “Calling” 371). The parallels between the two poets seem to embrace even the way both Thomas and Herbert devise their poems’ titles, as Ward suggests (107). These affinities suggest the possibility of a consistent impact of Herbert’s verse on Thomas’s poetics, indicating a space for a

31 See above Chapter 1 (“Faith and Experience” 35). One might wonder here about the relationship between seventeenth-century conceit and the Romantic understanding of metaphor as “reconciliation of opposites” (Hamlin 173).
32 See above “Introduction” (3 n.2) and Chapter 1 (“Faith and Experience” 31 n.11).
33 “The reason I have tried to write poems containing scientific images and which show some knowledge of the nature of science, is because, owing to the enormous part science and technology play in our lives, a divorce of poetry from them would be injurious to the development of poetry . . . Science and technology are concerned with vital areas of man’s concern, they are therefore taken seriously” (Ned Thomas and Barnie 37).
34 For more on the role of scientific discoveries in the time of Donne, Herbert or Crashaw, and the impact those advances of human knowledge had on their style, see for instance O.P. Titus “Science and John Donne” or Robert Ellrodt “Scientific Curiosity.”
35 In further elaborating on these issues, Thomas directly mentions Donne, and in a manner which reveals the Metaphysical poet’s role as a model: “It has been said that Donne was the last English poet to be still abreast of contemporary knowledge. Granted that modern specialisation has made this impossible, what are we to make of a poetry that cannot embrace some scientific knowledge and that is incapable of using words which are daily on the lips of a growing section of the population?” (Ned Thomas and Barnie 37).
future study which could focus on the nuances and extent of his debt to the Metaphysicals in terms of textual construction and poetic technique.  

Within the tradition of religious poetry, Gerard Manley Hopkins deserves mention as another pivotal source of inspiration for Thomas. The Welsh poet’s partiality for the natural world as setting or theme links his verse not only to Romanticism but also to the sonnets of his Victorian predecessor. So do his methods of delineating that world, making it figuratively provide “sudden glimpses of eternity” (Ormond 55). As was observed throughout this thesis, he also readily adopts motifs and imagery from the author of “The Windhover.” Arguably the most crucial point of comparison, however, is that both poets shared a liking for maximising poetic richness. To this end, they also harnessed alliteration, consonance and similar orchestration devices, even if the twentieth-century poet was less intense in that respect. In this, they both owed much to the Welsh system of stress and sound arrangement called cynghanedd.  

Given this trait, it seems obvious that Thomas’s poetry is solidly rooted in the native soil of Welsh literature. Surprisingly, then, no study has as yet detailed exactly how the nation’s poetic traditions bear on his sound organisation techniques (or, for that matter, how their impact differs from that of the English poets). Content with briefly asserting this influence, critics measure the poet’s prosody more readily within the broader Celtic framework, against the Scottish and

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36 Critics have so far remained strangely reticent on what the twentieth-century follower of “Donne’s thin, cerebral laughter” (“Taste” CP 284) owes to the author of Songs and Sonnets. Scholarly comparisons of Thomas to the Metaphysicals have so far been limited to George Herbert, particularly to the analogies in both poets' ideologies and vocations. See e.g. McGill “Calling” and Poets’ Meeting, or McKenzie Vocation.  
37 Cf. Christopher Morgan (54-55).  
38 For Thomas’s indebtedness to cynghanedd, see e.g. Westover (Stylistic Biography 50). For more on Hopkins and cynghanedd, see Gweneth Lilly “Welsh Influence.”  
39 Westover devotes merely one paragraph to the issue, noting en passant that, in resorting to selected properties of cynghanedd, Thomas stands close to his contemporaries, including Glyn Jones, Leslie Norris, and Dylan Thomas (Stylistic Biography 50). Although the names of Dylan Thomas and Edward Thomas often appear on lists of his literary models, their influence is usually not considered with respect to sound organisation. For more on R.S. Thomas’s relationship to his two Welsh namesakes, see Westover (Stylistic Biography 85-93), Walford Davies “Bright Fields,” Amis “True Poet,” Damian Walford Davies “Recording,” or Tony Brown “Elegy.”
Irish poets Hugh MacDiarmid, Andrew Young, and Austin Clarke. In *Stylistic Biography*, Westover interestingly compares Thomas to Clarke regarding his manner of distributing stresses, building end-rhyme, as well as employing “assonance and consonance [which] link words within lines, between lines and across stanzas” (52). However, the scholar forgoes any considerations of the artistic, semiotic, and structural functions of these patterns, pointing instead to their connection with Thomas’s political agenda (51). Westover’s conclusions feed into the current critical consensus that Thomas’s discovery of the fellow Celtic writers contributed mostly to his conception of a regional poet’s role, tapping into his desire for a national literary *renaissance*. If Thomas was driven by an ambition to create a distinct, “Welsh literature in English, strongly grounded in a knowledge of Welsh history, language, and literary tradition” (Ned Thomas and Barnie 28), the ways in which this ambition was realised artistically is still under-recognised.

As Thomas’s familiarity with the works by Clarke, MacDiarmid, and Young makes clear, it is not possible for anyone to write in total isolation from the trends of one’s own times – not even for an inhabitant of the most remote corners of the Welsh countryside. Although critical literature has stressed his affinities with Ted Hughes (particularly with the volume *Crow*), Thomas seems rather reluctant to align himself with his later contemporaries, being drawn instead to the Modernist movement. Most critics agree that William Butler Yeats, Wallace Stevens, and T.S. Eliot are crucial twentieth-century poetic authorities for the poet. In terms of

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40 As Perry declares, “Thomas’s learning of Welsh and subsequent immersion in the literary tradition of Wales during the 1940s and 50s needs to be seen in the broader context of his interest in the literature of Scotland and Ireland” (*Chameleon Poet* 54). Apart from Perry’s book, outlines of Thomas’s connection to other Celtic authors include Dafydd’s “Thomas and MacDiarmid” and Westover’s *Stylistic Biography* (51-59). Westover, Perry (65-78), Crotty (“Lean Parishes”) and Tony Brown (*R.S. Thomas 18-22*) also see Thomas’s *The Minister* as rooted in Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger*.
41 See e.g. Perry (*Chameleon Poet* 54-64).
42 Thomas was compared to Hughes for instance by Corcoran (76), Conran (19), Peter Abbs (“Mythopoetic Imagination”), and Perry (*Chameleon Poet* 161-205).
43 In “Probings,” Thomas confesses his indebtedness to poets such as T.S. Eliot, Pound, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams (Ned Thomas and Barnie 43-44). Critics mostly explore his alignments with Modernists with respect to allusions, ideas, and life circumstances. William V. Davies’s papers “Influence sans Anxiety,” “An Abstraction Blooded” and “Theological Crisis” well
poetic technique, it seems that the main impact of the Modernists on his style lies in the area of metre and versification. In “Making It New: R.S. Thomas and William Carlos Williams,” David Lloyd – after Thomas himself – attributes the poet’s switch to free verse to the example of the author of “The Red Wheelbarrow.”

The ascendancy of Yeats in Thomas’s oeuvre is partly in line with the Romantic inclinations of both the Irish Nobelist and the Welsh admirer of Wordsworth. For instance, Damian Walford Davies’s putting of Thomas’s penchant for “mythopoeic and symbolic modes of representation” (“Yeats Said That” 16) in the context of his Yeatsian ancestry seems in fact a statement of their common Romantic grounding. This raises the question of the specificity of Thomas’s debt to Yeats as distinct from the overall effect of the Romantic style on his poetics. It seems that motifs rooted in philosophical conceptions authored by the Irish writer – such as the gyres, stages of the moon, monster in the Bethlehem manger, or serpent’s egg – provide a more specifically Yeatsian inheritance, and certainly Thomas’s verse abounds in such arcane Yeatsian allusions.

Thomas’s strategy of iterating and linking metaphors in contiguous, mutually-illuminating chains can also be traced to the Irish Modernist, as a number of critics have noticed. For instance, this accumulative character of both poets’ work has been commented upon by Lloyd (“Looking Glass” 438-39), Damian Walford Davies (“Yeats Said That” 5), and Wintle (83, 300). In Yeats, Eliot and R.S. Thomas, A.E. Dyson contends that Thomas’s construction of self can best be defined as “an interplay of echoes” (302 and passim). This likeness for “echoes” – in the sense of both repeating one’s own imagery and, in the case of Thomas, “repeating” from his Irish predecessor – spurs Davies to argue that the two poets fashion their identities as shifting, unstable, complex and “dialogical.” According to Davies, Thomas stages his internal disputes and conducts a “dialogue” with Yeats, building on the Irish poet’s dictum that “[w]e make out of the quarrel with others...

illustrate this trend, identifying Wallace Stevens (as well as Matthew Arnold) as a source of Thomas’s notions of the relationship between faith and poetry.

44 See Thomas’s interview “Probings” (Ned Thomas and Barnie 43-44). The topic has also been addressed by Westover (Stylistic Biography 93-108 and passim).

45 For a more detailed outline of such allusions, see for instance Damian Walford Davies “Yeats said that.”
rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” (qtd. in Davies 2). Thus the relationship between the two poets “involves Thomas in Yeatsian counterpointings, contradictions and dialectic” (1). It might be interesting, in future studies, to examine how this assumed “quarreling” character determines the construction of the poetic texts written by both poets, and to trace these similarities more precisely.

If many have commented on the analogies between Thomas and his contemporaries or earlier poetic models, the above overview brings home the fact that these analogies still remain poorly explored. To map his achievement in literary history more fully, we need to set his work against the poetics – not just the themes and ideas – of the twentieth-century, of the region, or of religious verse. The present thesis has laid the groundwork for such future explorations, by adumbrating the fundamental traits of Thomas’s poetic style. Concluding Stylistic Biography, Westover urges critics to abandon the worn-out paths in the poet’s reception, to “get away from merely viewing him as a poet of the bald Welsh hills, or as the dark seeker of a God who refuses to talk” (170). Instead, he calls for approaches which “see R.S. Thomas afresh” by “look[ing . . . ] at how, as a poet – not as a political figure or Welsh culture hero – he [forms his themes], engaging the very techniques he uses” (170). R.S. Thomas: Poetic Horizons can be perceived as the first step in this new direction.47

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46 Davies’s paper comes close to an article by Neal Alexander, titled “Dialogues of Self and Soul,” which compares Thomas’s and Yeats’s prose autobiographies, highlighting the dialogic way of creating the self by both poets.

47 As I argued before, Westover’s attempt itself can hardly be considered successful here – for more on this point, see above “Introduction” (12-14).
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Author/s: 
Trapp, Karolina

Title: 
R.S. Thomas: poetic horizons

Date: 
2014

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