Chapter 3

One of Life’s Conscientious Objectors

The riddle of existence that puzzles the poet prompts him to write to satisfy “my own personal quest for enlightenment. I work out in a poem my way towards the truth” (qtd. in Markham 139). This perennial thirst for the truth has led to philosophical inquiry and radical discoveries. Siddhartha, in Hesse’s *Siddhartha* tells his friend Govinda that “in every truth the opposite is equally true” (143). In his autobiography, Thomas has evinced similar sentiments: “... a poet is a chameleon. His privilege is to be able to change his mind and his attitude. For an honest person, it isn’t possible to hold always to the same position” (79).

Thomas’s poetry seeps from sources where the hidden contraries of life strive to maintain a balance. The aura of compassion with which he subjects the universe to scrutiny, alternatively brightens and darkens reflecting the scenes perceived. His stubborn persistence in pursuing this ambiguous reflection on life is mentioned in his letter to D. Z. Phillips, where he claims to be “trying to operate on as many levels as possible, mostly failing; being self-contradictory, open to refutation on the charges of inconsistency, but occasionally perhaps setting up overtones” (qtd. in Phillips ix).

The outer world that Thomas explores is that of the harsh Welsh countryside, where he ministered to the peasants for many years. Later, observation gives way to introspection as he delves into the inner terrain of
the mind, and the search for an elusive God fills out the canvas of life. Dynamic tensions between belonging and not belonging, between “Welshness” and “Englishness” and between belief and uncertainty can be discerned in his poetry. Along with this is his conviction that the evil that lurks on earth is partly of man’s own making. The realization that life in nature can ennoble as well as brutalize, that the Welsh language struggles for survival in its own homeland and that religious faith cannot assert itself in a society devoted to values which are quite different constitute the mainsprings of his poetry. His search for meaning is later extended to art, music (piano-playing) and painting (the Impressionist paintings), and in his letter to D. Z. Phillips, Thomas’s concept of religious belief assumes wider implications when he concedes, “All is ambivalence, multivalence even” (qtd. in Phillips ix).

The quest for a deeper sense of identity underlies Thomas’s poetic project. Thomas’s wavering attitude towards his nation and towards God, can be traced to various factors. The major tensions examined in this chapter include the painful issue of identity and belonging that revolve around his traumatic caesarean birth; the linguistic tension of existing between two cultures and the frustrating inadequacy of language, in mediating the silent language of God. The precarious position of Thomas, an Anglican priest of the Church in Wales ministering among predominantly nonconformist parishioners is also examined. A delineation of the complex subject of a
poet’s craft and Thomas’s response to the challenge of blending a religious sensibility with an aesthetic perspective rounds up the over-all survey of the factors that were responsible for the inner tension that led to an ambivalent outlook on life.

Thomas describes his birth in the opening prose passage of *The Echoes Return Slow* in a mechanical and impersonal manner:

Pain’s climate. The weather unstable. Blood rather than rain fell. The woman was opened and sewed up, relieved of the trash that had accumulated nine months in the man’s absence. Time would have its work cut out in smoothing the birth-marks in the flesh. The marks in the spirit would not heal. The dream would recur, groping his way up to the light, coming to the crack too narrow to squeeze through. (2)

His complicated birth due to the fact that he was a breach baby crystallizes in “pain’s climate.” The problem of human pain becomes a lifelong subject to be explored in his poetry, prose and lectures. The wounds inflicted on the sensitive child during childbirth, become the source of poems including “Ap Huw’s Testament” (PS), “Welsh” (BT), “The Boy’s Tale” (BT), “In Memory” (WI), “Album” (F), “Salt” (LP), “Roles” (EA) and “It Hurts him to Think” (WW). In “Petition” (H’m), he acquiesces to “seeking the poem / In the pain” (7-8).
Kierkegaard’s description of the poet as “An unhappy man who hides deep anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so formed that when the sigh and cry pass through them, it sounds like lovely music” (Either/Or 43), can be recalled here. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts,” also deals with the place of human suffering in the universe. J. P. Ward writes that Thomas’s poetry often “indicates a strong character covering a deep hurt” (7). Thomas himself seems to confirm this observation in “To a Young Poet” (BT):

From forty on

You learn from the sharp cuts and jags
Of poems that have come to pieces
In your crude hands how to assemble
With more skill the arbitrary parts
Of ode or sonnet, while time fosters
A new impulse to conceal your wounds
From her and from a bold public,
Given to pry. (11-19)

In an autobiographical essay published in 1986, Thomas has also focused on the problem of physical pain encountered both by the mother and child during a difficult delivery. The lack of self-esteem and the unworthiness that was to haunt him for the rest of his life is closely related to his ambivalent attitude to his body, cruelly described as “the trash that had accumulated nine months” (ERS 2). “Age” (PS), considers a man’s failure to
realize the possibilities of being. In “A Life” (EA), Thomas again recalls the spiritual wounds that inflicted him: “A Narcissus tortured / by the whispers behind / the mirror” (10-12). This poem gathers together elements of Thomas’s persona, that are transformed into poetry:

Lived long: much fear, less

Courage. Bottom in love’s school

Of his class; time’s reasons

Too far back to be known.

Saving his face in verse from the humiliations prose inflicted on him. One of life’s conscientious objectors, conceding nothing to the propaganda of death but a compulsion to volunteer. (1-4, 16-21)

The harsh criticism, evident throughout Thomas’s work, with which he lashes out at himself and others, including God, indicates the sense of inadequacy that haunts him. The lack of identity of the newborn also finds mention in the poem, facing the opening prose passage, in The Echoes Return Slow where he describes himself as “time’s changeling” (2) who has “no name” (1).
This preoccupation with the feeling of being a “no-one,” finds echoes elsewhere. In his childhood, when left alone at home, Thomas used to be disturbed by noises in the empty house. In his autobiography, he describes his fear: “He would shout. No answer. He would climb the stairs, step by step, and having reached the top would listen again. Suddenly he would leap forward a step or two, thundering with his feet and shouting “Boo!” Nothing, No-one” (31). Later on, as a student at the University of Wales, Bangor, Thomas feels hurt when mocked by classmates: “‘Who does he think he is?’ was the murmur he would hear from time to time. But he didn’t know who he was. He was no-one” (38). After the birth of his son, Thomas asks, “How can no-one be a father to someone?” (56). Thomas’s main autobiographical work written in Welsh is titled Neb. The Welsh word neb is ambiguous. Neb in Welsh actually means “someone.” It also means “no-one.” In connected speech, it means “someone.” In colloquial speech – or titles – when the word is cut adrift from syntax, neb has the negative overtones of “no-one.” This preoccupation with his elusive identity is evident in his poetry.

In the interview conducted with Ned Thomas, Thomas states that people thought that he was joking, or being falsely modest, when he entitled his autobiography Neb. He explains his choice of the title and claims: “I don’t think that a really creative being should try to wear a persona. . . . A creative person must be so open to experience and impressions, so alert and critical of the ideas coming to him that he is not conscious of his own existence as a
person” (29-30). In this context it is interesting to note that in an essay on his aims in writing *Neb*, Thomas should refer to Yeats’s theory of the mask. In his introduction to Thomas’s autobiography, Jason Walford Davies refers to this: “There is a world of difference between a man of action in the flesh and one who believes in living in the imagination. In this connection, Yeats showed that each one has his opposite side which tempts him to be otherwise” (qtd. in Davies xxviii). The poetic medium enables Thomas to explore the idea that a person can adopt many different, often antithetical personalities.

In the autobiographical essay published in 1986, he refers to Keats’s negative capability. He claims that perhaps it was such a negative capability in himself that made it difficult for him to believe in a separate individual existence. He acknowledges that the realization, at times, that he doesn’t really know who he is, can be bewildering (313). Marie-Thérèse Castay describes R. S. Thomas’s poetry as sustained by a “tension between the self and . . . the consciousness of being nothing . . .” (147). Thomas’s understanding of his self is grounded in partial knowledge. The exterior racial, cultural and geographical factors define limits and set boundaries in attempts for definitiveness. The inner uncertainties of the mind signify the darkness of unknowing. The oscillation between opposite poles within himself is recorded in *The Echoes Return Slow*. Here he speaks of “his quarrel with himself” (ERS 112) which leads to his being “not sure of where / I belonged” (ERS 29) and the dilemma of having “a will of iron, perforated /
by indecision” (ERS 59). Thomas refers to his mind as “this dark pool I / lean
over” (ERS 71) and writes of probing that dark pool in the disturbing image of

putting my hand
down, groping with bleeding
fingers for truths too
frightening to be brought up. (13-16)

The individual’s struggle to realize his full potential in the midst of the
tug-of-war between the flesh and the spirit is captured in “The Mountains,” in
the image of the “rare flowers” that are just beyond reach. However, though
hazy and distant as the future seems, the poet can discern a faint outline of the
sojourn he had embarked on. In an uncollected poem of 1973, called
“Autobiography,” Thomas wonders whether he has a destination.

And I am not present

as yet.

Could it be said, then,

I am on my way, a nonentity

With a destination?

What do they do

Waiting for me? They invent

My name. (1-8)
The inkling that there is a destination, though opaque at present, and it will be reached at a certain point in future lurks throughout his journey towards self-discovery. In his autobiography, Thomas explicates his reaction to the sight of his shadow falling on the sixty-million-year-old pre-Cambrian rocks at Braich-y-Pwll. Gazing at his shadow on the pre-Cambrian rocks, while residing at the Lleyn peninsula, Thomas is conscious of his insignificance and of the discrepancy between the formidable age of those formations and the fleeting nature of man’s existence on earth. Nevertheless, he is also filled with awe that “. . . he had always been there, part of the unbroken chain of being” (78). He describes himself as “a no-one with a crown of light about his head” (78), going on to explain (quoting a verse from Pindar) that man is filled with glory when ennobled by God’s grace.

Thomas does not project himself as a “no-one” or a “some-one.” He explores the possibility of being both at the same time and believes that both can co-exist simultaneously in the human psyche. Thomas himself claims with respect to the choice of *Neb* as the title of his autobiography, that he would not have been asked to write an autobiography, if he really had been a “no-one” (qtd. in Davies, *Autobiographies* xiii). Davies reiterates: “Only a writer who knows, at a deep impersonal level, that he is *someone* can afford to call himself ‘no-one’” (xiii).

The search for his identity gradually merges with the search for God. “. . . Thomas’s search for the self becomes grounded in a larger and somewhat
mysterious spiritual context almost Whitmanesque in its dimensions. But we can also see developing in Thomas’s search for the self a unification with the more particular search for God” (Morgan 37). The peace that floods his soul, when he is in a state of contemplative silence, leads to a process of healing. The painful consciousness of his insubstantiality is counterbalanced by sudden moments of revelation that God has not forsaken him. The fusion of the human and the divine in the divided self, which can lead to a consolidation of the self, is also portrayed in the first poem of The Echoes Return Slow. The two wellsprings of his poetry – his wounds and their healing – form a kind of dialectic between reality of the fragmented self and the hope of recovery.

The idea of wholeness is to be found at the heart of much of Celtic poetry. A. M. Allchin, in his book Praise Above All: Discovering the Welsh Tradition, states that much of Celtic poetry is:

. . . a protest against a whole Christian culture, Latin and to some degree Greek, which rather sharply divides sacred from secular, priestly from poetic, grace from nature and God from humanity, on behalf of a world view which sees these things as very closely interrelated in ways which sometimes fascinate us and sometimes disconcert us. (10)

This bond becomes meaningful when contemplated from a wider point of view, in which the material and the spiritual do not function on contradictory
terms, but rather are complementary to each other. Esther De Waal, in her book *Celtic Light: A Tradition Rediscovered* also refers to “. . . the Celtic way of seeing the world: this ability to hold things together” (7).

Thomas is also concerned with this struggle for wholeness. According to him, art is produced when the contradictory impulses in the world are given due recognition in their respective contexts, and are then knit together in constructive patterns. These seemingly opposite elements form part of a larger whole. Thomas inherits this vision from Blake and shares it with his contemporary Dylan Thomas. The mingling of creative and destructive forces in nature is a perpetual theme evident in Dylan Thomas’s writings. All three of them believe in the holistic reintegration of the fragmented modern world through realignment of splintered groups or divisions. This can be effectively achieved through imaginative and innovative techniques.

Thomas considers his roles as priest and poet as being inextricably linked. When questioned about how he reconciles the vocation of the priest with that of the poet that he is, Thomas replies:

A lot of people seem to be worried about how I combine my work as a poet and my work as a priest. This is something that never worries me at all. . . . any form of orthodoxy is just not part of a poet’s province. A poet must be able to claim a certain amount of poetic licence, freedom to follow the vision of poetry, the imaginative vision of poetry. . . . And, in any case, poetry is
religion, religion is poetry. The message of the New Testament is poetry. Christ was a poet, the New Testament is a metaphor, the Resurrection is a metaphor and I feel perfectly within my rights in approaching my whole vocation as priest and as preacher as one who is to present poetry; and when I preach poetry I am preaching Christianity, and when one discusses Christianity one is discussing poetry in its imaginative aspects. The core of both is imagination as far as I’m concerned . . . . My work as a poet has to deal with the presentation of imaginative truth. (Ormond 52-53)

The link between the poet and clergyman is explicit in “The Country Clergy” (PS), “Country Cures” (BT) and “The Priest” (NBF). The role of a poet and the influence of his poetry is an oft-discussed topic. Shelley views the poet as society’s “unacknowledged legislator,” while Auden claims in “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” that: “Poetry makes nothing happen” (36). To Thomas, the poet has a unique role – that of an intelligent and responsible member of the community. In response to the Wales questionnaire sent by Keidrych Rhys, Thomas states that the urge to write is instinctive in him and that he, like Yeats, writes for “my own race” (qtd. in Wintle 220). His opinion about literature and society is that they are two mutually dependent entities, each striving to be free, yet each reacting upon the other.
The question of a poet’s choices first expressed in “Death of a Poet” (PS) is later taken up in “Those Others” (T). While the former evinces a bias towards “the mind’s scansion” (15) against the “easier rhythms of the heart” (14), the latter forms a unified bond as he ponders over the enigma of being born in Wales. Thomas believes that the task of a poet is to endorse the true glory of life. In “Some Contemporary Scottish Writing” (1946), Thomas conceives of the poet as a spiritual guide, “winnowing and purifying . . . the people,” in order to “lead them to their essential dignity” (qtd. in Wintle 224). Aware of the glorious tradition of the Welsh society in which the poet has a central role, Thomas attempts to follow the footsteps of Talesin. Talesin, the ancient Welsh bard, is commemorated in “Talesin 1952” (SYT). The bardic order, active in Wales for over a thousand years, established poets as craftsmen belonging to a guild, employed to address community concerns in their poetry. In “The Cure” (PS), Thomas ponders on the influence wielded by the poet:

Consider, you

Whose rough hands manipulate

The fine bones of a sick culture,

What areas of that infirm body

Depend solely on a poet’s cure. (5-9)

Thomas often reminds one of the Old Testament prophets – warning, criticizing, and urging higher ideals. Here, he places himself in the line of
two other poets – Ezra Pound and Hugh MacDiarmid. Pound, in his “Usura” Cantos, and in prose pieces, exposes the avaricious nature of contemporary society. In the 1940s, among contemporary writers, Thomas considers the Scottish poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, as providing a model of what, for Thomas, the poet should be. In *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, MacDiarmid wields satire in an attempt to purge Scotland of her bogus attitudes. He describes MacDiarmid as: “a figure of lonely integrity, speaking out against the uniformity, materialism, and bureaucracy of modern life, which stifles the imaginative and spiritual freedom of the individual” (Brown, “On the Screen” 187).

He deplores the slow decay of the Welsh fabric, claiming that degeneration can be discerned in every part of national life. In “Money and Position” he rails: “As long as there are food and drink, greyhounds and cinemas, the majority of our people don’t care what government is in power. The churches and chapels will be empty soon because of [these attitudes], and the fine arts are almost dead already” (29-30).

The pursuit of a Utopian “Abercuawg” embodies the lonely struggle of the poet, who strives to maintain a balance between keeping his creative faculties alert to outside influences and having to point the way to others. “Abercuawg,” an oration given at the National Eisteddfod in Cardigan, in 1976, is a delineation of a Shangri-la, an imaginary, ideal place that preserves its pristine innocence. He is in pursuit of it. He concedes that he does not
know what “Abercuawg” is or where it is located. This place, like the land of Arcadia, exists in the mind. It deals with the process of becoming. Here man attempts to regain the wholeness of his being, by living in harmony with nature. The poet’s external search for “Abercuawg,” symbolises the inner journey of the self towards knowledge. It also expresses a desire for a renewed relationship with God. The poet states:

Abercuawg . . . has to do with the process of becoming. . . . But in accepting the process of becoming, man realises that he is a created being. This is man’s estate. He is always on the verge of comprehending God, but in so much as he is a mortal creature, he never will. Nor will he ever see Abercuawg. But through striving to see it, through longing for it, through refusing to accept that it belongs to the past and has fallen into oblivion; through refusing to accept some second-hand substitute he will succeed in preserving it as an eternal possibility. (164)

Here, Thomas explores the gulf between the ideal and the real. This vision parallels Kierkegaard’s vision of the self that is in constant development:

The principle that the existing subjective thinker is constantly occupied in striving, does not mean that he has, in the finite sense, a goal toward which he strives, and that he would be finished when he had reached this goal. No, he strives
infinitely, is constantly in process of becoming . . . This process of becoming is the thinker’s own existence . . . Existence itself, the act of existing, is a striving. (Concluding Unscientific 84)

The principles in Thomas’s “Abercuawg,” parallels Jung’s concept of individuation. Individuation is the process of integrating the various poles, in which every system is simultaneously permitted to reach the fullest degree of differentiation, development and expression. Jung postulates that man’s unconscious mind urges him to transcend temporary barriers, in order to realize the potential of his unique self. The ideal conditions are often expressed in Thomas’s poetry in terms of simplicity, plainness and clarity – “rising he broke / Like sun crumbling the gold air / The live bread for the starved folk” (“Bread,” PS, 11-13); “Its waters / Were as clear as his own eye” (“Other,” H’m, 2-3).

In his introduction to The Penguin Book of Religious Verse (1963), Thomas elaborates on the interdependence of religion and poetry:

What is the common ground between religion and poetry? Is there such? Do definitions help? If I say that religion is the total response of the whole person to reality, but poetry the response of a certain kind of person, I appear to be doing so at the expense of poetry. Perhaps Coleridge can help us here. The nearest we approach to God, he appears to say, is as creative beings. The poet by echoing the primary imagination recreates.
Through his work he forces those who read him to do the same, thus bringing them nearer the primary imagination themselves, and so, in a way, nearer to the actual being of God as displayed in action. . . . Now the power of the imagination is a unifying power, hence the force of metaphor, and the poet is the supreme manipulator of metaphor. This would dispose the idea of him as a minor craftsman among many. The world needs the unifying power of the imagination. The two things, which give it best, are poetry and religion. . . . The mystic fails to mediate God adequately in so far as he is not a poet. The poet . . . shows his spiritual concern and his spiritual nature through the medium of language, the supreme symbol. The presentation of religious experience in the most inspired language is poetry. (8-9)

The poet’s craft forms the subject of a few poems. In “Poetry for Supper” (PS), two poets discuss the skill that goes into the making of a poem. One feels that “verse should be . . . natural” (1), while the other believes that one “must sweat / And rhyme your guts taut” (10-11). The strain that goes into the making of a poem, appears in “Epitaph” (PS). “To a Young Poet” (BT) delineates the metamorphosis of a budding poet. The first twenty years of composition constitutes the formation period, and the next ten signify teething problems. Thus, according to Thomas, there is no significant fulfilment in the first half of a poet’s career. Later, “from forty on . . .” (11),
the poet learns to construct valuable pieces of verse and this process of assembling parts is a life-long vocation. *Poetry for Supper* contains poems about the writing of poetry – "Temptation of a Poet," “A Day in Autumn,” “The Letter,” “A Blackbird Singing,” “Absolution” etc. The mature garnering of themes in “The Maker” (T) seems to imply a wider, prophetic significance. “That” (NBF) borders on the sharpening insights of the poet. Thomas, who has never flinched from brutal self-criticism, is ruthless in exposing his shortcomings. The hypocrisy of the poet is expressed in “Pharisee. Twentieth Century” (T). “No” (NBF) delineates the afflictions that often beset a poet and are sometimes sufficient to stop the songs in his head. In “Truth” (BT), though conscious of his self-imposed task: “the truth’s here, / Closer than the world will confess, / In this bare bone of life that I pick” (16-18), Thomas is also painfully aware that:

I have failed after many seasons
to bring truth to birth,
And nature’s simple equations
In the mind’s precincts do not apply. (5-8)

A recurring voice heard in his later poetry is one of loneliness. Timbres of isolation and desolation reverberate in “Postscript” (H’m), “Period” (H’m), “Eheu! Fugaces” (WI) and other poems.

A priest for more than four decades, Thomas had worked on the vineyards of small parishes for the church, trying to apply the God-concept in
a society devoted to quite different values. A persistent thorn in the flesh was
Thomas’s unique position: that of being an Anglican priest in the Church in
Wales. By virtue of its Englishness, he sensed that he was being alienated
from the common folk. The religious experience of most Welsh people is
focused on “chapel” rather than “church” – they worship with the
nonconforming dissenting sects. Thomas belonged to the Anglican Church.
The head of the Anglican Church was the monarch of England. Neither in
Scotland, nor in Ireland or Wales, was the church the established church, as it
was in England. In Wales the church is not referred to as the Church of
Wales, but as the Church in Wales, and consequently, it has no special
privileges. Welsh nationalists conceive of the Anglican Church in Wales as
profoundly alien – an ecclesiastical extension of the English drive to
subjugate Welsh culture. Thomas, though a Welsh patriot, chose to serve
what was originally an English church, and this anomaly made itself
persistently felt throughout his career.

Thomas’s longest poem, The Minister, sparkles with some of his
sharpest criticisms and insights concerning God, man and nature. Traditional
Protestant vices like the chauvinism towards women, the coarse language
used by the parishioners and the worship of money are delineated in the
poem. The seething anger that is sustained throughout the poem occasionally
spurts out: “And Job was right, but he forgot, / They all forgot that even a
pastor / Is a man first, and a minister after” (39-41). The plot consists of a
nonconformist minister, Reverend Elias Morgan, who is appointed to serve at a chapel in the hilly regions. The method of choosing a new pastor, the initial fiery enthusiasm of the minister, the tragic ineffectiveness of a religious ethic divorced both from liturgy and rite and from the rhythms of daily life, is deftly handled by the poet. Worn out by the strain of picking his way between tact and truth: “I knew and pretended I didn’t / And they knew that I knew and pretended I didn’t” (543-544), Morgan finally succumbs to pressure.

Thomas lashes out against Protestantism towards the end of the poem:

Protestantism – the adroit castrator

of art; the bitter negation

of song and dance and the heart’s innocent joy-

You have botched our flesh and left us only the soul’s

Terrible impotence in a warm world. (552-556)

His personal experiences as a priest become a rich source for the poetic faculty as he explores the world of nonconformism. Nonconformism had been the main current of Welsh religious and social life from the eighteenth century. Thomas conceded his kinship with it, but it did not prevent him from exposing some of the questionable aspects inherent in the Protestant ethos. Though friendly with many nonconformist ministers like H. D. Owen, and admiring their stand against war, their loyalty to the old language in places like Aberdaron where it would have paid them to provide for English, he did not feel comfortable in a chapel. He perceived a lack of taste and atmosphere
and a defect in the order of services. However, in subsequent volumes, the fierceness with which the priest attacks the tenets of nonconformism, is mellowed and softened in the course of time.

Thomas was conscious that the church in which he served, failed to provide moral and spiritual leadership to Wales, as a nation, at an important point in her history. In a letter to the Church in Wales’s weekly, *Y Llan*, he claimed:

Nobody can deny that our nation is caught in two minds at a fateful time in her history. Despite the two ugly wars which have gone by, there is continuous talk of another war, and considerable preparation in that direction. In the face of all this there are some preaching pacifism, some others demanding Welsh regiments, while the majority of our young people will be quietly joining the British army. Is the Church in Wales giving any consistent guidance in these circumstances? It isn’t. It is accepting things as they are, as it did before and during the last war . . . Wales is, as was said above, caught in two minds, but she has, as a small nation, an inclination toward pacifism and friendship. If the church were ready to do its duty as the Church of Christ, it ought to take advantage of the situation, and give every support to that inclination. (5)
In the same letter, he also deplored the Church in Wales’s servile attitude to England and its tradition, claiming that many of the priests did not stand for peace and justice. He deplored the necessity of having a bilingual church in an area that was “wholly Welsh,” just because there were rich Englishmen living nearby. He attributed the fault to the Welshmen stating:

Didn’t they follow England servilely, praying for victory and singing the English national anthem on every occasion . . . . If we don’t respect ourselves, if we don’t have enough backbone to withstand the English tide, we can’t expect anything else but scorn. (5)

The frustrating desire to do something to provide guidance to the people and the shocking realization that he was not expected to expound “radical” ideas in a potentially flammable situation is delineated in his autobiography (44). There were some changes in the church, which were not to his liking – e.g., on the ramification of the denominations. A commission on the liturgy was considering changes in the services and the retranslation of the scriptures. Thomas, however, clung to the King James Bible and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. In the Church in Wales, clergymen usually retired at sixty-five, but could remain till seventy. Thomas did not want to face the reformed services and the complications due to the unification of the denominations, so he retired at the age of sixty-five, on Easter Sunday.
The conflicting interests that emerged in his vocation as a priest led to an ambivalent attitude that was reflected in his poetry. In his autobiography, Thomas declares that he was conscientious enough in executing his duties. He portrays his duties as a priest, in poems like “Death of a Peasant” (AL), “Evans” (PS), “The Mill” (BT), “Service” (P), and others. “Death of a Peasant” (AL), depicts a priest’s helplessness in the presence of the mighty leveller, Death. Its moral profundity emerges from the smothered compassion that permeates the poem.

You remember Davies? He died, you know,
With his face to the wall, as the manner is
Of the poor peasant . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
I remember also the trapped wind
Tearing the curtains, and the wild light’s
Frequent hysteria upon the floor. (1-3, 9-11)

The weather, the physical objects in the room and the indifferent visitors blend to offer “meaningless comfort” (16). “Priest and Peasant” (SYT) can be read as a spiritual exercise. Thomas explores the imperceptible development of sin that gnaws at the heart, fattens itself on matter within and then uncurls its tentacles to crumble human nature. The priest stands by helplessly, mumbling prayers. “Country Cures” (BT), is a rich poem on the vocation of a priest. An austere objectivity rules Thomas’s delineation of the mellowing of priests in “lost parishes,” where their collars fasten them by “the
neck / to loneliness” (10-11). The acts of priesthood are examined in “The Mill” (BT), where a farmer, bed-ridden, is, for his family, “One more beast / To be fed and watered” (17-18). The endless grind of ministering to a sick parishioner, the grudging admiration at the compassion that weaves its way through his family as they take care of him and the perception of other sounds in the room, add to the sombre atmosphere of the poem. The dereliction of religion and the frustrations of a minister of God, unable to reach into the hearts of worshippers, are subtly expressed in “Service” (P).

We stand looking at
Each other. I take the word ‘prayer’
And present it to them. I wait idly.
Wondering what their lips will
Make of it. But they hand back
Such presents. I am left alone
With no echoes to the amen
I dreamed of. (1-8)

As the priest waits “idly” for response from the congregation, he is saved by music, and fortunately, “the roof listens” (12). The stark loneliness that permeates the poem penetrates one to the core. Occasionally, the priest wonders about the purpose of his life. The realization that a life that he did not choose, chose him, is reflected in “Who?” (P):

Someone must have thought of putting me here:
It wasn’t myself did it.

What do I find to my taste?

Annually the grass comes up green

The earth keeps its rotary motion. (1-5)

The “someone,” who put him there, obviously has all the cards on the table. Though he knows that it’s a futile exercise, Thomas indulges in bouts of self-analysis, relentlessly pursuing the seemingly unaccountable ways of the Mighty One who rules the universe. It provides depth to his poems and integrity to his being. In “They” (NBF), the pastor tries to mediate between the peasants and God. He puts their austere conditions before God, wondering all the while about the possible and practical means of communicating the reciprocating impulses in a language that can be understood.

Anxiety about language has always been an important issue for the poet. In “Circles” (MHT), Thomas poses the dilemma of the poet:

who, from the rope-trick
of the language, called down
like an angel stranded
somewhere between earth and heaven. (13-16)

Two dimensions of the problematics of language assume importance here. The first one consists of the English / Welsh debate. The other problem involves the inadequacy of language to convey meaning. In the interview
with Ned Thomas, Thomas remarks: “I complained once to Saunders [Lewis] about the tension of writing in one language [English] and wanting to speak another [Welsh], and his reply was that out of such tensions art was born” (28). The angst generated by this English / Welsh language debate is crucial to an understanding of the poet’s work and it has been discussed in detail in the fourth chapter of this thesis. The utilitarian consideration of an appropriate medium for communication indicates Thomas’s painful awareness of his existence between two cultures. This “tension of ‘inbetweenness’” (Morgan 4), has far-reaching consequences. It reveals itself in the ambivalent position that he adopts towards his homeland, towards his concept of nature and later, towards his search for a personal God.

The linguistic crisis assumes importance with the publication of the 1972 volume, H’m. The title of H’m is in itself, an articulation of his inability to communicate his vision in a fitting language. The word h’m is pre-verbal – a grunt that can either be considered as a sceptical question or as a purr of contentment. The poem, “H’m” depicts the problem of articulating a language that is adequate to convey the speaker’s meaning.

and one said

speak to us of love

and the preacher opened

his mouth and the word God

fell out so they tried
again speak to us
of God then but the preacher
was silent reaching
his arms out but the little
children the ones with
big bellies and bow
legs that were like
a razor shell
were too weak to come. (1-14)

The monosyllabic and monomorphemic words used in the poem, the absence of punctuation and capital letters and the rudimentary syntax of the poem, enhance the sense of inadequacy conveyed. Language, in his hands, serves as a lens for scrutiny and a means of operating on the ills of the world.

In early poems like “Evans” (PS) and “Death of a Poet” (PS), Thomas had to deal with the question of an adequate language to convey his emotions. The vocation of the priest entailed the necessity of compressing the Unfathomable Reality in pellets of language that could be fed to the illiterate peasant. This led to hoards of difficulties. How could the finite, of which language was a part, capture, confine or even contain the Infinite? Was it sufficient as a medium to mediate the unknowable, inaccessible truth of God? In “The Absence” (F), he realizes that he has to “modernize / the anachronism of my language” (8-9). “Thomas’s scepticism about the language has become
one of the central subjects of his poetry, and is closely connected to his religious concerns” (Vicary 91).

His misgivings about the imperfect and corrupted language are conveyed in many poems. In “Directions” (BHN), he refers to “this dessert of language / we find ourselves in” (1-2), and in “Out There” (LS), he realizes that “There is no speech there such / as we know” (2-3). “Relay” (LS) conveys a sense of the block that man encounters. Speech has evolved throughout the years in “marvellous languages,” but now man is in the throes of fumbling with the inadequacy of words.

I switch on, tune in –

the marvellous languages

of the peoples of the planet,

discussing the weather! Thousands of years

Speech was evolving . . . . . . . . . .

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

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . I think of man

on his mountain; he has paused

now for lack of the oxygen

of the spirit . . . (1-5, 7-10)

The inadequacy of language manifests itself in the fragmented nature of Thomas’s poems. Elisions, incomplete sequences of thought, abrupt deviations, multiple images and half-expressions abound as the poet seeks for
meaning. Metre and rhyme are often discarded, and as enjambments are often used, a kind of formal deconstruction characterizes the whole. “Language in this discourse loses its serenity, its confidence of presentation” (Herman 156). Words are sometimes denied their usual associations. The Derridean *différance* is paralleled not only in the splitting of language to postulate opposite values, but also in the need to relinquish a “logocentric” understanding of words.

Human language is also perceived as a source of religious disappointment, as there is a gradual shift from a purely rationalistic understanding of language towards a mystical awareness. How can one postulate faith and meaning within the limits set by negation? The poet speaks to God, but does not get an answer. In “Shadows” (F), he writes:

> And so I listen
> instead and hear the language
> of silence, the sentence
> without an end. (8-11)

In “The Gap” (F), he describes the “grammarians’ torment” (28-29) in articulating the apocalyptic possibility: “How to take his rest / on the edge of a chasm a / word could bridge” (14-16). This leads inevitably to the bleak observation in “Night Sky” (F), that “It is its own / light, a statement beyond language / of conceptual truth” (9-11). The poet realizes that God is beyond any concept we possess and so it is almost impossible to speak of him.
However, his desire to do so leads to ambivalence. “Waiting” (F), questions the traditional language used to discuss God.

Face to face? Ah, no

God; such language falsifies

the relation. Nor side by side,

nor near you, nor anywhere

in time and space. (1-5)

Thomas scans a vast arena of subjects including mathematics, anthropology, theology, science, criticism, linguistics etc., for a vocabulary that would suit his purpose. Language acquires new overtones, as man tries to converse with God in a scientific language, described in “Dialectic” (F) as “the figures / that beget more figures” (11-12). In “The Absence” (F), he has to acknowledge that he occasionally fails in his attempts: “My equations fail / as my words do” (13-14). The poet comes to “the knowledge that your resistance / is endless at the frontier of the great poem” (18-19), in “The Combat” (LS). His persistence in attempting the insurmountable task of mediating God is commendable, and he confesses, “For the failure of language / there is no redress” (8-9).

Thomas’s struggle with the language ends in a contemplative silence. The poet realizes that a man has to content himself with imperfect knowledge. In “Petition” (H’m), he states:

Seeking the poem
In the pain, I have learned
Silence is best paying for it
With my conscience. (7-10)

However, the silence of God, and the inevitable silence of the poet, is eloquent in itself. When Job claims that God “does great things beyond understanding” (9.10), when the psalmist states that God understands him even if he does not speak (Ps. 139.4) and when Jesus remains silent as He is being questioned by Pilate (Mark. 15.5), they are not failing to convey their intentions in an adequate language. Rather, these are meaningful expressions in a different kind of language. There is a language that is outside speech, the language described in “Shadows” (F), as the “language / of silence” (9-10). There are also mysteries described in “Night Sky” (F), as those “beyond language” (10). Is silence superior to language? The question haunts us as it does him: “Conversation, soliloquy, / silence – a descending or an ascending / scale?” (ERS 115). The question is not settled, and the possibilities are left to the discretion of the readers. “It is typical of Thomas, this man of temperament and moods, to raise the question of priority between speechlessness and language, and to be ambivalent in his attitude to both . . .” (Markham 142). In “The New Mariner” (BHN), he reaches a point of equilibrium:

In the silence
that is his chosen medium
of communication and telling

others about it

in words. (1-5)

The greater the desire for self-knowledge and the deeper the sensitivity to external stimuli, the more acute will be the tension and the consequent degree of ambivalence in the attitude of a person. Thomas’s quest for self-identity against uncompromising odds, the linguistic crisis, his position as an Anglican priest of the Church in Wales in a predominantly nonconformist nation and the precarious task of maintaining a balance between the vocation of a priest and the creative precociousness of being a poet are some of the factors that are responsible for the inner tension – the fact that there is “no truce with the furies,” as the title of his penultimate major volume of poetry declares. This tension generates ambivalence, which manifests itself in his attitude towards the major themes of his poetry – his nation, nature and God. The oncoming chapters focus on these perspectives.