Chapter 4

**A Real Cymro**

This chapter proposes to examine Thomas’s ambivalent attitude towards Welsh themes: his nation, Wales, towards the Welsh peasant and towards the Welsh language. The first part reveals his fascination for his land and his pride in being a Welshman. Before going into a detailed analysis of particular poems, other aspects touched upon in the first part include the dilemma of an artist who wishes to serve his nation; a brief history of Wales; Thomas’s nationalism and the activities he was involved in. The poems examined give a contrasting picture of the past glorious, rich history of Wales and the present depopulated state of the Welsh countryside, highlighting the erosion of cultural values. The demeaning influence of the English is depicted in some poems. Thomas’s vacillating attitude to his land can be traced to his evergreen hope that Wales would preserve her “Welshness,” which is constantly thwarted by what he sees around him.

In “Those Others” (T), Thomas reveals his fascination for the land of Wales:

I have looked long at this land,

Trying to understand

My place in it – why,

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

This was the cramped womb
At last took me in
from the void of unbeing. (1-3, 6-8)

Its appeal lies in its particular poise between a mythical past and an uncertain future, affording food for contemplative thought. In his autobiography, Thomas claims: “the land of Wales has to be loved as well as its people” (103). Always conscious of the unique position of Wales, by virtue of its geography and tradition, Thomas strove to enlarge and beautify that way of life. The depth of his attachment consequently prompted him to lash out in fury, when his keen senses warned him that some changes plaguing the society would be detrimental in the long run. The poetic tradition of Wales and its historical heritage were feathers in its cap, but the avaricious nature of the Welsh, and their sickening apathy towards preserving their culture, left an indelible mark on the poet. His pride in being a Welshman and his love for his nation thus bubble up in sporadic expressions of disgust, despair and hatred in various poems. The question as to whether the native culture should be kept beautifully intact, or whether the doors should be thrown open to the process of anglicisation, keeps gnawing at the heart of the poet. Thomas’s dialectical vision of Wales has been defined by Peter Abbs: “It is as defined in his early poetry a country torn between the demands of traditional culture and modern civilization, wrenched forward by the gaudy pressures of the present, pulled back by a history ‘brittle with relics’ ” (104).
Thomas believed that an Anglo-Welsh writer had a moral obligation to his society. In “Some Contemporary Scottish Writing,” an essay first published in the Wales magazine in 1946, Thomas voiced the dilemma of an artist – whether he should be involved directly in political activities or whether he should influence others through his creative work, claiming that the failure to resolve this issue often led to frustration (qtd. in Merchant 24). When asked for whom he wrote, Thomas replied that he wrote for his own race and in “Welsh” (BT) he states:

Why must I write so?

I’m Welsh, see:

A real Cymro,

Peat in my veins. (1-4)

He wrote poems about Wales first in the forties and the fifties till 1974, when What is a Welshman? (1974) became the postscript to the nationalist poems written in the previous decades. After a long break, “Welsh Airs” (1987) suddenly appeared, in which he gathered poems about his beloved Wales. The earlier poems focus on the history and culture of Wales, the language used by the people, the social life and the slow decay of the society. The poetry of the sixties concentrates on the contemporary Welsh situation, the deepening inroads of anglicisation and the weakening resolve and internal collapse of the Welsh people. What is a Welshman? questions the optimism generated by the political culture of the period. It attacks South Wales’s
industrial society and coalfield culture. The challenging conservatism of the poems reprinted in “Welsh Airs” (1987) shows the poet’s loyalty to the cultural philosophy he learned in the forties. The ethnic resurgence of the Welsh middle class, the hostility towards science and urban life and the elevation of culture, literature and rural values, form the basis of these poems.

A brief history of Wales may enable one to get a better picture. The Celts occupied Britain till the fifth century, when the Teutonic Saxons and Angles invaded the country. The Celts were driven to the West where they settled in Wales and Cornwall. During the sixth and seventh centuries, rival princedoms began to emerge in Wales. From 630 onwards, the Welsh began to call themselves Cymry. Even though warfare between the Welsh and the Anglo-Saxons continued till the eighth century, the mountainous terrains of Wales and the belligerent nature of the people helped them protect themselves from enemies. Gradually, under the leadership of stalwarts like Rhodri Mawr, Hywel Dda, Maredudd ab Owain, etc., larger kingdoms were formed within Wales, and by the eleventh century, under the leadership of Gruffydd ap Llywelyn, the whole of Wales came under a single dominion. However, as primogeniture was not recommended, kingdoms were later divided and this lack of cohesion proved to be the undoing of Wales.

The Normans invaded England in 1066 and began to extend their tentacles into Welsh territories. The next five centuries witnessed clashes between Wales and England. Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, acknowledged in 1267
as the “Prince of Wales” led the Welshmen in two wars but was killed in battle. This meant the end of Wales as an autonomous political entity (1282). According to the statute of Rhuddlan (1284), new English laws were established in Wales and Welsh criminal law was abolished. Divided into shires, “Englishries” were granted special privileges when compared to “Welshries.” In 1400, Owain Glyndwr led Welsh uprisings but was crushed. Henry Tudor who ascended the throne in 1485, having Welsh blood in him, treated Wales less despotically. The two “Acts of Union” (1536 and 1542) passed during the time of Henry VIII marked the beginning of a new history. The Welsh were granted equal privileges as the English, but they had to speak the English language and fight in English wars. Corrosion set in and Welsh customs were gradually eradicated. Some people migrated to London where they began to make a name for themselves in law, academics and the church. The industrial revolution caused many poor Welsh workers to migrate to cities to find jobs. The Anglican Church failed to provide a linguistically adequate ministry in Wales, so evangelical Methodism and nonconformism took root in Wales as Welsh language was offered in chapels. However, nonconformism ultimately led to a stultifying morality. In 1847, the “Blue Book” enquiry into the “condition of education” in Wales – primarily referring to the means afforded to the labouring classes to acquire the English tongue – resulted in the working classes, redoubling their efforts to speak English.
Today, the commonalty of Wales enjoys a greater aggregate of security, rights and opportunities than before and has a diversified society. Some valleys are blighted, and yet some others enjoy political equality as the English (same laws, freedom of movement and expression). Transport, economic and communication systems are shared. With less than 10% of parliamentary seats in their hands, and an ever-active Plaid Cymru, ‘Welsh National Party,’ the question remains as to whether Wales should try to be independent or whether she should encourage the process of amalgamation already in progress.

Thomas’s nationalism is a curious blend of pacifism, prophetic utterance, repressed militancy, Christian socialism, furious disgust and passionate exhortation. To add fuel to the fire, his anglicised upbringing constantly jabbed at his precarious relationship with Wales. In “A Welsh Testament” (T), Thomas pays a special tribute to his beloved nation:

Even God had a Welsh name
We spoke to him in the old language;
He was to have a particular care
For the Welsh people. (13-16)

He examines the tradition, culture and history of Wales, its myths and legends, in order to establish that the older order had offered a code that enabled man to place himself both within the minor microcosm of Wales and also within the wider macrocosm of the world. The aimless, drifting culture of
the industrial world of the present time offers a stark contrast. His most fierce
scorn is reserved for his people whose eyes, fixed on advancement, fail to see
the dangers. However, Thomas does not blindly recommend the ways of the
past. He advocates an emergence from the past to a re-examination of the
present. Paradoxically, Thomas depends on the idea of Wales as a lost nation,
in order to summon up a terrible energy in a valiant attempt to save it. His
love for the land assumes a perverted exodus and the tone of his political
poems range from mild despair to a fierce hatred and dismissal of the Welsh
for their lack of interest in their language and their lethargy in opposing the
English onslaughts.

Thomas speaks of the need of Wales to resist the deadening effects of
materialism, industrialism and militarism, which he identifies with the
influence of England. The situation in Wales would certainly improve if the
Welsh stood as one. It gradually dawns on him that the English respects
violence and considers the needs of those who oppose them with vigour.
Except in India, all other countries have won freedom by fighting for it. The
pacifism that he had advocated earlier gradually undergoes a shift as the
political climate changes. Life has to die in the cause of life. What advice
could a priest conscientiously offer others in the context of war? In his
autobiography, he claims “Such thoughts tormented the priest all the time”
(95). His perspective shifts as the tension generated by conflicting emotions
is internalised.
The 1960s were a turbulent period when the political situation deteriorated in the country and abroad. The Investiture Ceremony of 1969 at Caernarfon Castle, when Charles was declared the Prince of Wales, was seen by the people as a tactic of the Labour Government to strengthen and mobilize British sentiments of the majority of Welsh people. The Welsh society was divided between fierce opposition and qualified support. As sporadic bouts of violence erupted at various places, anti-terrorist measures had to be adopted. Thomas in “To Pay for his Keep” (WW) lashes out against the machiavellian attitude of the ruling party, and describes Charles as being amused by the antics of those who mill around him, “rigid with imagined / loyalty . . . ” (6-7).

Incensed by what he saw around him, Thomas witnesses, rails and prophesies in his poems. He was also actively involved in many movements, fighting for the rights of the Welsh, campaigning for the Pwllhell branch of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), environmental protection, the *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* ‘Welsh Language Society,’ set up by Emyr Llewelyn in 1971 and later the *Adfer*, a Bangor-based splinter group of the former. Since the war, several writers were committed to the preservation of the threatened culture and in “A Lecturer” (BT) and “The Patriot” (BT), Thomas commemorates the Welsh patriots Gwenallt and Saunders Lewis. Thomas’s contempt for the lukewarm support of the Welsh cause is an echo of sentiments expressed by Dafydd Iwam, another Welsh writer. In his
autobiography, Thomas describes his meeting with political leaders like Saunders Lewis, Islwyn Ffowc Elis, Euros Bowen, Douglas Young and the ardent discussions and activities they were involved in. From time to time, Thomas was involved in controversies. In the 1980s, he antagonized Welsh respectability by refusing to condemn the extreme activities of *Meibion Glyndwr*. The members of the “Sons of Glyndwr” had burnt down English cottages. Later, responding to a question put by Naim Attalah for an interview published in the *Oldie* in Oct. 1995, he claimed that though he deplored killing, the life of one English person was insignificant when compared to the destruction of a nation.

The question as to whether violence on behalf of one’s nation could be justified put him in a quandary. As an artist and a Welshmen, Thomas had personal opinions about what was happening around him, some of which were quite radical. However, some choices were simply not available to him, owing to his religious vocation and the social status he appeared to aspire to at times. His despair arises from a feeling that he arrived too late, and though a poet and not a nationalist politician, he has a wistful sense of what might have been in an entirely different British dispensation from earlier times. The Welsh-language scholar R. M. Jones says that the poet’s melancholic hatred towards the Welsh is basically a positive and reactive hatred (qtd. in J. P. Ward 63). The “cultural wound” gnaws at him, and in turn, he prods the people. In poetry collections written later, Thomas returns occasionally to
Wales with a different attitude. Clothed in a spiritual cloak, the country he has crucified is resurrected in the light of a new and quiet love. This peculiar love-hate relationship towards Wales can also be traced in the works of other Anglo-Welsh writers like Dylan Thomas and Caradoc Evans. They love the land but disapprove of the bigoted nationalistic Welsh attitude, rooted in its nonconformist traditions.

It was at Manafon that Thomas first began to write about his beloved Wales. Though in earlier times Thomas referred to historical events, the nationalist poems of the later period were focused on the cultural decay prevalent in the society – money, consumer goods, tourism, idolatry of science, casual sex among the people, etc. The rural life, which formed the backdrop of his early poems, is the subject of a number of poems. Working among farmers, he saw that they clung on to a doomed life style and an eroded position, and by writing in English about them, he implicitly challenged the adequacy of the Welsh language and the old ways. “The Welsh Hill Country” (AL), shatters the pastoral idyll in stark images that give a realistic picture. The “fluke,” “foot-rot,” and “fat maggot” as well as the “moss” and “mould,” though not easily visible, are nevertheless there. In a superb metaphor for a stillborn culture, Thomas presents his farmer, still farming, “Contributing grimly to the accepted pattern, / The embryo music dead in his throat” (17-18). The gradual balding of the hills when many people migrated to cities in search of jobs is lamented in the description of the
stark, alienated countryside in “The Depopulation of the Hills” (AL). “His gaze is compelled by the peasant farmers living out their bare lives on harsh uplands because their lives reveal in stark simplicity, man’s essential nature and the natural realities of his existence. It is with them that truth is to be found” (Jenkins 88).

In an essay published in 1945, “The Depopulation of the Welsh Hill Country,” Thomas had referred to the “ready smiles” and “carefree ways” of the poets, musicians and singers who occupied the hills for thousands of years. To him, they formed the “heart of Wales” and they knew how to live and how to relax in nature. Men lost their real meaning in life when they abandoned their farms. However, the other side of the coin is presented in other poems where the starved people are waiting for someone to die. The bare hills symbolize a dry spiritual condition and “Priest and Peasant” (Syt) and “The Last of the Peasantry” (Syt) present no pastoral dream, but harsh reality. The Thomasian landscape of “starved pastures” depicted in “Out of the Hills’ (SF), has its say in the development of the peasant. The “traditional discipline of flint and frost” (19-20), leaves him hardened, and his nonconformist faith fails to provide him with a clear-cut discerning power. The reduction of his identity through toil, elaborated in “A Labourer” (SF) evokes sympathy in poignant words: “Is there love there, or hope, or any thought” (9). The dehumanising influence of the unyielding terrain on the hill farmer, finds expression in “The Hill Farmer Speaks” (AL): “I am the farmer,
stripped of love/ And thought and grace by the land’s hardness” (1-2). “Age” (PS) depicts the ravages of time on a sturdy peasantry. “Burgos” (NBF) is an elegiac lament for a land “bitter with sage / and thistle” (4-5). One has to dig hard to find a nugget of hope glimmering in the early poems. “Too Late” (T) is such a rare, sentimental celebration of rural life. In this poem, Thomas contrasts the peasant’s position in the farm before and after the arrival of the machine, which, according to the poet, would lead the farmer to destruction. The Welshmen who have migrated to other places often have nostalgic memories of the past. In “Expatriates” (PS), they recall the language, the gentle murmur of “the cold stream’s sibilants” (17) and the beauty and magnificence of Lake Aled and Lake Eiddwen. “The Small Window” (NBF) is an exquisite poem that superbly combines beauty and wrath in a few powerful strokes. The octave celebrates the beauty of Wales and its benign influence on the mind:

        In Wales there are jewels
        To gather, but with the eye
        Only. A hill lights up
        Suddenly; a field trembles
        With colour and goes out
        In its turn; in one day
        You can witness the extent
        Of the spectrum and grow rich . . . . (1-8)
The poem, however, tilts violently in the sestet with dark hints that only a select few, those “chosen,” can enjoy the benefits of the wealth available:

With looking. Have a care;
This wealth is for the few
And chosen. Those who crowd
A small window dirty it
With their breathing, though sublime
And inexhaustible the view. (9-14)

Historical events are referred to in “The Rising of Glyndwr” (SF), “The Tree” (AL), “On Hearing a Welshman Speak” (PS), “Hyddgen” (T), “Traeth Maelgwn” (NBF). He turns to the patterns and heroisms of the past to find some meaning in the present, where the machine encroaches on the land, erasing the rural order. “Welsh Landscape” (AL) is a brutal, honest analysis of Wales’s assumptions about itself. Thomas contrasts the past glory when brave Welshmen resisted the invading Romans, Saxons and Normans, with the bleak present situation when even the language has become strange:

To live in Wales is to be conscious
At dusk of the spilled blood
That went to the making of the wild sky . . . . (1-3)

He states that things have changed to such an extent that “You cannot live in the present / At least not in Wales” (11-12). The poet wistfully realizes that no national regeneration can be founded on false mythology:
There is no present in Wales,
And no future,
There is only the past,
Brittle with relics. (20-23)

In “Welsh History” (AL) Thomas berates and extols the Welsh. “Border Blues” (PS) exposes the intricacies of Welsh history, mythology, folklore, geography and the Welsh language. The trap into which the accident of birth has cast him is bemoaned in “A Welsh Testament” (T). He broods over the Welsh condition in “Sir Gelli Meurig” (NBF) and double-edged statements abound in “Expatriates” (PS):

Not British; certainly

Not English, Welsh

with all the associations,

Black hair and black heart

Under a smooth skin,

sallow as vellum . . . . (1-6)

“Walter Llywarch” (T) depicts the sourness of Welsh social life, where “Wings were spread only to fly / Round and round in a cramped cage / Or beat in vain at the sky’s window” (19-20) and there is strong mockery and withering self-reproach in “Welsh” (BT):

When I see this land

With its farms empty
I want the town even,
The open door
Framing a slut,
So she can speak Welsh
And bear children
To accuse the womb
That bore me. (25-26, 30-36)

Thomas protests against the acceptance of an imposed and alien English culture that strips the Welsh of the ennobling influence of their roots. The sustained irony and sharply satirical comments in “A Welshman at St. James’ Park” (P) are evolved by sentiments of nostalgia and loss. He describes his visit to St. James’ Park, where he has to abide by the rules and regulations. He becomes conscious of the “perfection” of things there and the suffocation of creatures in the park and contrasts it with the freedom experienced on the Welsh hills. The poem ends with a neat comment on the separateness of Wales and England: “I fumble / In the pocket’s emptiness; my ticket / was in two pieces. I kept half” (16-18). In “A Welshman to any Tourist” (SYT), the Welsh confess that they have nothing to offer except the “waste of thought,” a natural consequence of the “mind’s erosion.” In “Strangers” (BT), the poet makes it clear to invaders that “We don’t like your white cottage. / We don’t like the way you live” (1-2). Many Englishmen owned holiday cottages in
Wales. The fanatic supporters of the Welsh cause opposed this and they were often involved in acts of arson (i.e. the cottages were burnt down).

“Afforestation” (BT) and “Rose Cottage” (P) record Thomas’s protest against the domination of Wales by an external economy. In “His Condescensions are Short-Lived” (WW), the English and the paraphernalia associated with them – their tanks, guns, procession, medals, awards, etc., are lightly dismissed:

I feel sorry

for the English – a fine people

in some ways, but victims

of their traditions. (1-4)

He criticizes the Englishmen in “A Welsh Testament” (T), who attempt to transform Wales into a national park for tourists:

You are Welsh, they said;

Speak to us so; keep your fields free

Of the smell of petrol, the loud roar

Of hot tractors; we must have peace

And quietness. (29-33)

Yet, in his autobiography, he grudgingly admits that Englishmen are more appreciative of the beauties of Wales than the Welsh themselves. The English have names for butterflies and birds found in the Welsh countryside that the Welsh do not have. He also admits that the English take more effort to learn
about the wonderful outdoor world than the Welsh do (142). However, he also
mourns the fact that Wales is now a land of pylons and wires, a land of
television masts and police poles, a land of new roads full of visitors rushing
to the sea, where the planted forests and caravan parks are fast swallowing the
remaining open ground (99). "Looking at Sheep," (BT) advocates a form of
resistance to the “Elsan culture” that threatens to devour them. Here Thomas
brutally refers to the lavatory system in the caravans driven by Englishmen,
who spent their holidays in Wales. These caravans were usually found all
over the Welsh lands during the summer season. Satire, as powerful and
piercing as that of Jonathan Swift’s, permeates “Welcome to Wales” (NBF),
as the poet welcomes potential candidates to be buried in Wales. He
encourages them by listing their illustrious ancestors who were buried so, and
promises that the “mourners,” “amens” and “coffins” could be arranged at a
moment’s notice. The tourists, who bring their cars, litter, listless voices and
cheap consumer goods to the Welsh scene, become the butt of ridicule in
many poems. The inner detachment is evident in “Welcome” (BT):

You can come in,

You can come a long way;

We can’t stop you.

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

But you won’t be inside . . . (1-3, 9)
In one of the most complex of his poems “Reservoirs” (NBF), Thomas broods over the mystery of Wales – its past, present and future. He attacks the industrial culture of the South that led to the destruction of Welsh communities. In Oct. 1965, many years of protest came to a climax when the Liverpool Corporation decided to create the reservoir of Tryweryn to service the city’s industrial expansion. They did so by flooding a mid-Wales valley, which had been the home of a Welsh-speaking community for years. Non-violent demonstration by the Welsh intelligentsia later led to more violent measures and the pipelines in the vicinity of the dam were blown up. It led to a new nationalism with young Welshmen writing in English and looking to the Welsh-language culture for inspiration. “Reservoirs,” thus is an elegy for the suicide of a culture, and Tryweryn becomes the synecdoche for the Welsh geopolitical landscape. Controlled anger runs deep and there are no facile resolutions in the fury with which he describes how the English scavenge among the ruins of the decaying Welsh culture. His passion stems from his conviction that the Welsh themselves have dug a grave for their language.

Where can I go, then, from the smell

Of decay, from the putrefying of a dead

Nation? I have walked the shore

For an hour and seen the English

Scavenging among the remains

Of our culture, covering the sand
Like the tide and, with the roughness
Of the tide, elbowing our language
Into the grave that we have dug for it. (14-22)

Ned Thomas, a lecturer at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth has given a detailed description of Welsh nationalism in ‘The Welsh Extremist’: a Culture in Crisis. He focuses on the fluctuations evident in the movement for preservation of the Welsh culture and concedes that imported consumerisms have corrupted the Welsh fabric. He states that it is humiliating for educated Welshmen to spend time “fighting for what should be unquestioned rights” (24). Regarding the language campaign, there are conflicting opinions too. Some people within the Plaid Cymru disapprove of some of the radical measures taken by the members of the Welsh Language Society. Ned Thomas feels that “People must be given enough power to negotiate with other groups and to set their own priorities” (26).

Thomas’s incorrigible faith in his nation made him continue to exhort the people through his poems and campaigns. In his review of Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee by Dee Brown he claimed:

The Welsh nation is not finished yet. The language is still alive.
We have not yet been put into a reservation to scrape a living there. There are intelligent, sensible people among us. Our air and our streams have not yet been polluted. Right is on our side. Rise up, you Welsh, demand leaders of your own
choosing to govern you in your own country, to help you to
make a future in keeping with your own best traditions, before it
is too late. (111)

“Welsh History” (AL), also records his faith in the regenerative capacity of
his people:

We were a people, and are so yet.

When we have finished quarrelling for crumbs

Under the table, or gnawing the bones

Of a dead culture, we will arise

And greet each other in a new dawn. (26-30)

However his consciousness of the Welshmen’s “ineptitude for life” and the
cultural erosion prevalent makes him confess in “Those Others” (T) in
despair:

Hate takes a long time

To grow in, and mine

Has increased from birth

This hate’s for my own kind,

For men of the Welsh race. (9-11, 20-21)

Commenting on these lines Salman Rushdie writes that it is

. . . startling to find an admission of something close to self-
hatred in the lines of a national bard. Yet this perhaps in the
only kind of nationality . . . nationist . . . a writer can be. When
the imagination is given sight by passion, it sees darkness as
well as light. To feel so ferociously is to feel contempt as well
as pride, hatred as well as love. (22)
The hope that Thomas clings on to and his ideal vision of a new Wales is
mentioned in “A Country” (BT), in which he claims:

At fifty he was still trying to deceive
Himself . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
And yet under such skies the land
Had no more right to its name
Than a corpse had; self-given wounds
Wasted it. It lay like a bone
Thrown aside and of no use
For anything except shame to gnaw. (1-2, 9-14)

Thomas’s bleak picture of the Welsh scenario was often the cause of
irk to others. Dafydd Elis Thomas, a political leader, criticized Thomas for
“contrasting mythical past with realistic present” (62) and that “being Welsh
is not a cause for depression” (66). What Is a Welshman? was probably R. S.
Thomas’s spirited defence of his view, where he questioned the superficial
optimism generated by the political powers. Thomas’s political vision
appears in the first poem in What Is a Welshman? where he embarks on an
imaginary nightmare in which his preaching is greeted with a barbed welcome. Most of the poems in *What Is a Welshman?* deal with the predicament of living in Wales. In “The Bush” (LP), he refers to Wales as “this country / of failure” (10-11), and the same line of thought is reinforced in “He Lies Down to be Counted” (WW). The poet’s dissatisfaction with the political condition also appears in “He Has to Vote.”

The tranquillity he experienced in nature was an oasis of comfort in the midst of the turmoil. In “The Earth Does its Best for Him” (WW), the scent of hay wafts an optimistic aura of hope as: “It is incense, the seasonally / renewed offering of the live earth” (13-14). To him, the hills of Wales afford an enduring way of life and in “Arrival” (LP), Thomas waxes eloquent on their ability to enable one to “see yourself / As you are” (14-15). In his autobiography he states: “People will disappoint you, but Wales will never be unfaithful. She is always there in all her unspotted virginity, despite all the atrocious things that we do to her” (103). He describes the joy of watching the birds and the fish, while sitting on the rocks in Braich-y-Pwll at Aberdaron claiming:

Here is a way of life that is indescribably older than us, and it is a great privilege to be able to go to the coast in order to see such life in all its energy and merriment. And the views on a clear day are incredible. Who in his right mind would think of living anywhere else while all this wealth is available? (103)
His conflicting views regarding Wales stem from his ardent desire for a new awakening. Some of the poems glorify the traditional values inherent in the past, which set up a firm foundation for a conscientious way of living. However he is also fully aware that times have changed and one has to emerge from the past to function effectively in the present. After reaching Aberdaron, in the midst of the Welsh-speaking people there, Thomas no longer feels the need to write about Welsh themes and he chooses to explore other areas. His despair at the sterilising intellectualisation and the apathy rampant in the Welsh society and his awareness of the inevitability of anglicisation are the sources of his ambivalent attitude towards his beloved nation. Though he challenges their ways, the absence of a reliable paradigm that can be offered as a substitute, remains a source of frustration and Thomas brims with an unleashed frustration that vents itself in powerful lines of poetry. There are times too, when he emotionally resists change and one wonders whether at times he is Wales-oriented because he is always searching for specificity of identity. The conviction that he is often confused about his role, and that his “Welshness” is subordinate to his humanity, his priesthood, and his vocation as poet can be glimpsed in the last lines of “A Welsh Testament” (T):

I never wanted the drab role

Life assigned me, .............
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . the absurd label

Of birth, of race hanging askew

About my shoulders. I was in prison

Until you came; your voice was a key

Turning in the enormous lock

of hopelessness. Did the door open

To let me out or yourselves in? (38-39, 41-47)

The second part of this chapter examines Thomas’s ambivalent attitude towards the Welsh peasants, among whom he resided during the early years of his ministry. The spiritually starved and emotionally gnarled Welsh peasants form a major part of Thomas’s poetry. The long queue of life that wound through the Welsh valley drew his attention, sustained it for a period till a leap to a higher plane could be envisaged. The uncouthness of their way of life jarred on the nicety in him. Tension was generated as a result, and this was to remain a part of his spiritual and literary problem for many years.

Many poems record his experiences during his ministry among the Welsh folk. The innocence of childhood, touched upon in “Children’s Song” (SYT), echoes sentiments from “Fern Hill.” The “unconscious grace” of a typical village boy described in “Farm Child” (AL), contrasts with the picture of the child “Dropped without joy from the gaunt womb . . .” (1) in “Country Child” (SF). The gentle feminine presence that softens the harsh, rough life of peasant households is presented in “On the Farm” (BT). “Farm Wife” (PS)
commences on a pleasant note. Thomas picks up a sheaf belonging to a
bundle of lifetime achievement, a typical rural pastoral visitation, and
elaborates on it. The farmwife commands respect as the well-ordered
farmhouse silently witnesses to hard work, well done. As in many of
Thomas’s poems, the poem touches on the beauties of farm life but ends in
ambivalence. He is taken aback by the coldness in the woman’s eyes, which
provides a check at an unexpected moment. The life of a peasant is recorded
through seasonal changes in “Walter Llywarch” (T). There is a characteristic
ambivalence at the end when the warmth shared by the couple is contrasted
with “Each new child’s cry of despair” (37). The drab life of a hired farmhand
forms the substance of “Hireling” (T). He is reduced by a lonely existence to
the pathetic state of “the grey ice / Of a face splintered by life’s stone” (13-
14). “The Poacher” (SYT) describes a poacher, whose shy, stealthy
movements are compared to that of the fox and the weasel. A vivid, realistic
portrait of an old woman whose “days are measured out in pails of water” (1)
is pictured in “An Old Woman” (AL). “Rhodri” (P) is a pleasant caricature
and reminder of the Welsh gift for self-mockery. The indifference of the
farmers to the wars being waged is mentioned in “To The Farmer” (T).

In the 1972 BBC film made about him, Thomas confessed that when
he started his ministry in Manafon, he was “. . . brought up hard against this
country [Montgomeryshire] and I really began to learn what human nature,
rural human nature was like. And I must say that I found nothing I’d been
told, or taught in theological college was of any help at all in these circumstances. It was just up to me find my own way amongst these people.” (49). Puzzled by the enigma that surrounds the peasant, Thomas describes in many poems – in “Affinity” (SF), “The Gap in the Hedge” (AL), “Cyndyllan on a Tractor” (AL), “Age” (PS), “Portrait” (T), “There” (P) etc. – about the hours he spent in the fields, watching the peasant. The cramped mind and twisted emotions of the peasants, enveloped perpetually in a stink of cow-dung and sweat, are repulsive and yet there is something alluring in their way of life. Thomas’s curiosity about the peasant oscillates between a genuine sympathy at the pathetic state he is reduced to by the unfertile terrain, and a baffled horror at his ignorance and indifference towards the mysteries of art and church. In “A Priest to his People” (SF) he rails:

Men of the hills, wantoners, men of Wales,

With your sheep and your pigs and your ponies, your sweaty females,

How I have hated you for your irreverence, your scorn even

Of the refinements of art and the mysteries of the Church. (1-4)

Like Gray’s conflicting feelings for the “unlettered dead,” Thomas’s feelings for the peasants who “affront, bewilder yet compel my gaze” (37) vacillate between irritation, compassion and admiration. The frustrations of a rural pastor, who desires to uplift what he sees as animal in the peasant, and then, over the years, grows to realize that there is no possibility of identification
between them, appears in “Meet the Family” (PS). In “Evans” (PS), in which
the poet describes his visit to a sick parishioner, “. . . there are no ministerial
words of comfort only an uncomfortable mingling of pity and despair. Again,
perhaps because of the juxtaposition, the pity convinces more” (Nisbet 107).
He realizes that the puritanical and life-denying Welsh tradition of Calvinist
Methodism has done much to form them. “Memories” (AL) envisages a new
function for his poetry: “making articulate / Your strong feelings, your
thoughts of no date, / Your secret learnings, innocent of books” (5-7). In lines
reminiscent of Ted Hughes’s “The Thought Fox,” the poet acknowledges his
debt to his observation of the peasant and confesses in “Iago Prytherch” (PS)
that “My poems were made in its long shadow / Falling coldly across the
page” (21-22).

Iago Prytherch, a Welsh peasant, becomes the subject of a number of
poems. With men like Iago, Thomas begins to shape his vision of how the
world goes on. M. Wynn Thomas in his introduction to The Pages Drift: R. S.
Thomas at Eighty gives an explanation about the origin of this character.

The ancestry of Prytherch can be traced back at least as far as
1847 when English government inspectors produced a notorious
report condemning Welsh rural life as backward, pig-ignorant
and highly licentious. Partly by way of reaction, Welsh-
speaking nonconformists proceeded to construct a counter-
image, an idyll of a pious, musical, culture ‘volk’ which was in
its turn savagely challenged by Caradoc Evans in *My People* (1915). This fiercely original collection of iconoclastic stories established the terms in which a whole thirties generation of anglicized, urbanized, Anglo-Welsh writers, including the young Dylan Thomas, tended to represent life in the Welsh countryside. When R. S. Thomas, with his refined bourgeois and Romantic attitudes towards the country, was shocked into bewildered poetry by his first direct experiences of life in his rural parish, his work therefore became implicated in this longstanding struggle in Wales between two bitterly opposed styles of representation. Behind Thomas’s endlessly conflicting personal impulses to praise Prytherch and to blame him (in a style which originally owed something to Patrick Kavanagh) lies a very complex and intimate cultural dialectic. (10)

Thomas claimed that he had created the character of Prytherch, based on a real peasant he had met in a farm in Manafon. Patrick Kavanagh’s farmer, “Maguire,” also was an influential factor in the creation of Iago, who often appears in many poems like the Cheshire Cat. Iago’s first entrance in “A Peasant” (SF) is dramatic. Though not a soldier, but “Just an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills,” (2) attractive and repulsive in that “There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind,” (13) the peasant seems to deserve a soldier’s honour: “Remember him, then, for he, too, is a winner of wars /
Enduring like a tree under the curious stars” (21-22). “Which?” (T) explores the poet’s motives in creating Prytherch and he wonders whether to describe the peasant as “a survival / of a lost past,” (3-4) or as “the scholar / of the field’s pages” (9-10). Unlike Frost’s, these farmers are not philosophers. The round-the-clock presence of Iago in the fields is celebrated in “The Gap in the Hedge” (AL). In “Truth” (BT) he states: “He was in the fields, when I set out. / He was in the fields, when I came back” (1-2). “Affinity” (SF) presents a minimal, yet profound image of the farmer stripped to the basics, “Without joy, without sorrow, / . . . / Stumbling insensitively from furrow to furrow” (3, 5). In “Soil” (SP) the peasant is presented as a vegetable. “Lament for Prytherch” (SYT) is a lament for the “heart that is dry as a dead leaf” (10). The shrivelled, wizened appearance of the peasant tells of hours spent in the fields. The blank claustrophobic state of the peasant’s mind whose “wisdom dwindled to a small gift / for handling stock . . . ” (5-6) finds expression in “The Last of the Peasantry” (SYT) and the poet mournfully concludes “Within is dark and bare . . . ” (13). According to William Plomer, the peasants are “. . . a survival, almost an anachronism” (160). The peasants are reduced to “prototypes” and these prototypes assume cosmic significance by being linked with aspects of nature.

The poet examines his complex attitude to the peasant in many poems. In no uncertain terms, the poet unleashes a torrent of invectives on the peasant in “Valediction” (AL):
I know now, many a time since
Hurt by your spite or guile that is more sharp
Than stinging hail and treacherous
As white frost forming after a day
Of smiling warmth, that your uncouthness has
No kinship with the earth, where all is forgiven.
All is requited in the seasonal round
Of sun and rain, healing the year’s scars. (11-18)

Thomas feels superior because he responds to the spirit in Nature, which heals and makes one whole. The labourer, on the other hand involved in a daily battle for survival, is left with little energy or inclination for anything else and hence has little time for art. Immersed in his daily chores, he has no time to submit to the benevolent influence of nature. Thomas claims that he can understand this, but he also adds that if the peasant loses his “moral nature,” that is, the spontaneous response of a human being to the grace freely bestowed by the natural order, then he is truly lost.

The maturing relationship of the priest and peasant finds expression in “Iago Prytherch” (PS). The warmth with which the poet addresses Iago in “Iago Prytherch” (SF) is nevertheless clothed in a subtle mocking tone. The poet examines the complex source of his creativity in the compassion he generates at the thought of the peasant’s life:

Made fun of you? That was their graceless
Accusation, because I took
Your rags for theme, because I showed them
Your thought’s bareness; science and art,
The mind’s furniture, having no chance
To install themselves, because of the great
Draught of nature sweeping the skull.
Fun? Pity? No words can describe
My true feelings. (9-17)

Thomas’s attitude gradually softens as he realizes that it is the demeaning influence of the harsh landscape that leaves the peasant in his despicable state. The “desolate acres” stretch out endlessly, and he is left to befriend the pig and the cattle, till he reaches a state, which he describes in “The Hill Farmer Speaks” (AL):

The pig is a friend, the cattle’s breath
Mingles with mine in the still lanes;
I wear it willingly like a cloak
To shelter me from your curious gaze. (11-14)

Thomas traces the decline of the farmer down to the level of his cattle. Nourished on mucous and the wind, his mind shrinks “as stray thoughts pass / Over the floor of my wide skull” (16-17).

A new note is sounded when, amidst the muck and mire, the plaintive voice of the farmer reaches the poet. In “The Hill Farmer Speaks” (AL) the
peasant insists that the despicable conditions in which he survives is not of his
own making: “Listen, listen, I am a man like you” (5). “The peasant appears
to be a case for consideration, compassion or conscience” (J. P. Ward 17). In
“Invasion on the Farm” (SYT), Prytherch addresses the priest:

I am Prytherch. Forgive me. I don’t know

What you are talking about; your thoughts flow

Too swiftly for me . . . . (1-3)

The poem redirects the critical emotion upon the refined priest, who is gently
coaxed to confront his affectedness. Prytherch, redefined in his “stark
naturalness,” becomes the subject of a minute epic, and his capacity to endure
and accept is acknowledged by the poet. Though, in “Affinity” (SF), Thomas
clinically observes that a sensitive affinity with the peasants is not easy, as
they are cut off from culture, poetry and religion, the compassionate tone that
marks the end of the poem, so different from the natural detachment at the
beginning, indicates the mellowing of the poet’s mind. “Don’t be taken in /
By stinking garments or an aimless grin” (16-17) he postulates, for “He also is
human” (18). “ . . . However parched, frustrated, indifferent or hostile a man’s
nature may be, he is still a man, never to be despised, never beyond salvation.
The Christianity of this poet is implicit, not paraded . . .” (Plomer 160).

The close relationship between the peasant and nature leads to a fusion
of their spirits. In “Man and Tree” (SF), the peasant though “dumb” and
“sapless” with eyes “knotted by years of pain,” (6) is still able to teach
“Even as an oak tree when its leaves are shed / More in old silence than in youthful song” (12-13). Iago, conceived in wartime, and developed against the background of Hiroshima, thus embodies man’s fortitude. Ripe with practical knowledge of a “rich harvest” gathered over the seasons, he becomes a symbol of an enduring way of life against an invading culture. Faith hovers somewhere in the background, for the poet concludes in “Out of the Hills” (SF) that the farmer neither strays, nor is damned, “... The earth is patient; he is not lost” (26). In “A Priest to His People” (SF), he seeks to be reconciled with the peasant:

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

You will still continue to unwind your days
In a crude tapestry under the jealous heavens
To affront, bewilder, yet compel my gaze. (29-32, 34-36)

His plea for response is reciprocated by ambivalence in the peasant’s mute gesture – a raised hand – in “Peasant Greeting” (SF) in a doubt whether to “curse or bless.” In “Absolution” (PS) and “Servant” (BT) he concedes that the peasant’s struggle with the land represents integrity of purpose in flesh and blood, which the poet, in his search for truth has failed to achieve. The
reversal of ministry grows from the priest’s conviction that the peasant’s
“soul made strong / By the earth’s incense, the wind’s song” (9-10) endorses
the value and validity of his daily sacrificial offer at the “stone altar,” and he
begs for forgiveness in “Absolution” (PS):

    Prytherch, man, can you forgive
    From your stone altar on which the light’s
    Bread is broken at dusk and dawn
    One who strafed you with thin scorn
    From the cheap gallery of his mind?
    It was you who were right the whole time. (1-6)

Thomas, like Larkin and Hiero, perceives the essential similarity between
himself and the old peasant, and he expresses his sympathy. In “Servant”
(BT), the poet acknowledges his debt to Prytherch, the accurate insight he
provided him in the early years of immaturity: “You served me well,
Prytherch / from all my questionings and doubts” (1-2). The relationship is
shifted as the peasant, earlier a servant, is now raised to a sacramental level,
as teacher. “The Labourer” (AL) is a tribute to the enduring perseverance of
the human spirit, where the Cymro is promoted to a high pedestal. Echoes of
Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence” sound throughout the poem, as
the poet celebrates the sheer will power of the peasant that keeps him going.
The poet is impressed by the integrity of purpose embedded in the daily, grim
pattern repeated in the fields. Iago as a symbol consciously becomes another
side of the poet’s own mind. Even though he doesn’t really know the peasant, he claims in “He” (PS):

“He has become part of me / aching in me like a bone / Often bruised . . . ” (5-7).

The frequency of the poet’s repeated recourse to the treasured memory of the peasant is an indication of his significance in the priest’s life. Though he bids goodbye to the peasant in “No Through Road” (SYT) and in “Aside” (P) hoping to turn to other themes, Prytherch is again back in the fields, and in “Temptation of a Poet” (PS), the poet wishes to recreate Prytherch whom he has left behind, in order to renew

The lost poetry of our talk

Over the embers of that world

We built together . . . . (5-8)

Thomas questions him about his activities during the war in “For the Record” (P) and his admiration and robust faith in the ability of a sturdy peasantry is superbly compressed in the words:

Yet in your acres,

With no medals to be won,

You were on the old side of life,

Helping it in through the dark door

Of earth and beast, quietly repairing
The rents of history with your hands. (13-18)

Prytherch thus appears in the role of spokesman, confidant, opponent and even alter ego. R. George Thomas states: “In some subtle way Iago has become part of the poet’s mind, an alter ego . . .” (“Humanus Sum” 42). Belinda Humfrey considers Prytherch as Thomas’s meditative emblem of all his confrontation of life and its meaning (166). The patience and perseverance of the peasant, who has adapted himself to the dull work on the farm, inspires the poet. He provides the sounding board, for a leap into a deeper existence in the Spirit. Yet, it is not a blind admiration, for the poet is fully aware that his ruminations on the life of the peasant have not cleared all his doubts. In “Servant” (BT) he admits that he is still struggling with a lot of doubts: “Not that you gave / The whole answer . . .” (17-18). The intellectual dimension that is lacking in the peasant’s life creates parallel ripples in his life also. Yet, the seed sown upon the “thin / Soil” at Manafon, sprouts and bears fruit “Which is the bread of truth that I break” (30). In “The Dark Well” (T), Iago reaches a final status as the poet’s mentor, and poetry flows from a wound caused by empathizing with the peasant.

To me you are Prytherch, the man

Who more than all directed my slow

Charity where there was need.

There are two hungers, hunger for bread

And hunger of the uncouth soul
For the light’s grace. I have seen both.
And chosen for an indulgent world’s
Ear the story of one whose hands
Have bruised themselves on the locked doors
Of life; whose heart, fuller than mine
Of gulped tears, is the dark well
From which to draw, drop after drop,
The terrible poetry of his kind. (5-17)

The contradictory elements in the peasant’s character fascinate the poet and
ignite his poetic faculties. When Thomas first went to Manafon, he had a rosy
concept of the cultivated rural folk he would meet there. This expectation had
been fostered by the Welsh literary culture. However, the shock of being
initiated into the grim reality that confronted him in Manafon and the stunning
realization that the peasant had been reduced to the position of elemental man
over the years left the poet floundering for a firm footing. His initial distaste
at the crudity of the peasant’s lifestyle is gradually tempered by a grudging
respect and admiration for their incorrigible will power that keeps them going.
The grace and dignity of the peasant’s spirit, in a stubborn relentless battle for
survival, is perhaps aptly and simply described in the “The Face”(P):

    His hands are broken.
But not his spirit. He is like bark
Weathering on the tree of his kind.
He will go on; that much is certain. (21-24)

The final part of this chapter examines Thomas’s ambivalent attitude to his medium of composition. Though born a Welshman in Cardiff, Thomas grew up speaking *yr iaith fain* ‘the thin language’ – English, in an anglicised panorama. His anglicised upbringing was a factor that he seemed continually to regret for he longed to be purely Welsh. The chance discovery at college that his paternal grandmother had been Welsh speaking instilled in him a desire to learn the language. This desire became a necessity when he began his ministry and he would travel every week from Hanmer, on the English border to Llangollen, for Welsh lessons.

“All without the key of the Welsh language, one and all must needs pass by the door that opens on the real Wales” (“The Welsh Parlour” 49), he emphasized in an essay published in 1958. As he learned to speak and write the Welsh language at a later stage, he could not afford to make critical discriminations in his native language, a factor that compelled him to depend on the English medium for poetic composition. “Welsh” (BT) flows out of a deep, personal anguish that:

I can’t speak my own

Language – Iesu,

All those good words;

And I outside them. (10-13)
Though he finds his impetus, initiative and outlet in English, he complains that his work in English is a life-long wound inflicted on him that gnaws at his conscience at regular intervals. He asserts his birth right in “Welsh” (BT) deploring the practice of Welsh speakers using English words: “I want my own / speech, to be made / Free of its terms” (20-22). However, his inability to manoeuvre through the mazes of the nuances in the native language leaves him with the inevitable choice of writing in English. Choosing the English medium has produced an enriching internal tension in his work and in “Welcome” (BT), he dispels all false notions that Englishmen may entertain regarding the Welshman’s knowledge of their language:

We have learnt your own
Language, but don’t
Let it take you in;
It’s not what you mean,
It’s what you pay with
Everywhere you go . . . . (12-17)

The politically induced hatred he has developed of English, paradoxically nurtures the tortured passion of his creative passion, as a poet, of the incomparable range and power English possesses as a literary medium. Ned Thomas in The Welsh Extremist states that “In the recent poetry of R. S. Thomas, one catches the note of desperation and resistance that is hardly to be distinguished from a great deal of what is being written in Welsh . . . The note
of desperation and of protest rings true as a style in English, and it is true to the Welsh-language culture in which he lives his life” (108).

In his autobiography, Thomas describes the torture he endured at the Lleyn Peninsula where he could speak the language everyday but had to write in English.

How would things have turned out if he had been able to speak Welsh from the beginning? A futile question. But what he became more conscious of in Aberdaron was the fact that he had to write poetry in English. The conflict was more acute, although it was too late to do much about it . . . . But it was very different in the case of the languages involved: living in a traditionally Welsh area such as the Lleyn Peninsula, speaking the language every day, and yet expressing himself in a foreign language. For that was how he viewed the language on the lips of the visitors. Silently, he cursed their language. But the longer he remained in the area the greater the danger he saw to the Welsh language. It was this that turned him into more of a patriot than ever before in his life, if not in his literary work.

(77)

The campaign for the preservation of the Welsh language coalesced during the World Wars, when Welshmen were drafted into the armed forces. Some of them keenly felt the difference in the tongue spoken, and hence
wrote to newspapers and magazines to express their sentiments. As a result, the magazine Wales, under the editorship of Keidrych Rhys, was revived, with emphasis on Welsh characters, customs and mores. Writers paid homage to the older Welsh writers and the younger writers took pleasure in producing Welsh articles and poems.

Thomas acknowledges his debt to Saunders Lewis, who had fostered his love for the Welsh language, in “A Lecturer” (BT):

he’ll take you

Any time on a tour

of the Welsh language, its flowering

while yours was clay soil. (6-9)

In February 1962, Lewis, in a radio lecture, thundered that the decline of the Welsh language was not a historical accident but the result of deliberate English government policy to refuse to grant official recognition to Welsh as the language of public administration. Lewis warned that unless steps were taken immediately, the English language would devour the Welsh language and lead to its extinction by the beginning of the twenty-first century. With reference to the question of self-government, Lewis gave priority to the official establishment of the language. As a result of his warning, the Plaid Cymru activists formed the Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg ‘The Welsh Language Society,’ which operated on non-violent activities and sponsored campaigns of law breaking, to gain official state recognition for the Welsh
language. Thomas was also actively involved in such activities during the sixties, and turned to other writers for inspiration. He recommended the works of Hugh MacDiarmid, Douglas Young, Adam Drinam, etc., and often acknowledged his debt to them.

In “Some Contemporary Scottish Writing” (1946), Thomas discusses the possibility of the existence of an Anglo-Welsh literature and the position of the Anglo-Welsh writer. He claims that they should get rid of that foolish epithet “Anglo-Welsh,” for he feels that every Anglo-Welsh writer should first be a Welshman and only afterwards a writer. He states:

We have to face the possibility not, I think, of the disappearance of Welsh, but of its inadequacy as a medium for expressing the complex phantasmagoria of modern life. But if we choose English as that medium, have we the singleness of mind, the strength of will to remain primarily Welshmen? Ireland has done it, Scotland is striving after it, and we should do the same.

(qtd. in Merchant 25)

Though in earlier times, Thomas had consistently dismissed the possibility of a Welsh literature existing in English, his body of poetry was written in English and confined to the non-industrial regions of Wales. It was written for and to the Welsh people, and was distinctively nationalist in flavour. The unique, native literary tradition of Wales extending back to about fifteen hundred years was threatened from inside by the mixed populist form
of religious nonconformism and also from outside by the alien, Anglophone culture of cosmopolitan industrial Wales. Discussing the question of Anglo-Welsh literature, he states that compared to the growth of Anglo-Irish literature, there is no remarkable development in the field of Anglo-Welsh literature, but only a reflection of the undirected drifting of Welsh life. In “Some Contemporary Scottish Writing,” Thomas encourages younger poets to read and study the Welsh-language poetry of the great medieval period, the works of typical Welsh writers including Emrys ap Iwan, T. Gwynn Jones, Gruffydd, Elis Wynne, Gwilli, Parry-Williams, Tudur Aled, Goronwy, etc., in order to recreate the spirit of the past – a literature in English that is distinctively Welsh in spirit. However he also warns them to “. . . beware of lauding work merely because it has a national flavour. Poetry can still be bad poetry for all its tang . . .” (qtd. in Wintle 223).

In “The Creative Writer’s Suicide,” Thomas disagrees with the notion that bilingualism enriches the personality, sharpens the mind and enables one to have the best of both worlds (Davies 21). He confesses that he does not get as much pleasure from reading poetry in Welsh as in English, because of his handicap in grasping the subtleties of the language. According to him, the Anglo-Welsh writer subsists between two cultures. If he writes in English, he unwillingly contributes to the English culture. If he chooses to make his work more Welsh, he has to face the displeasure of his English readers, which is fatal for his survival as a poet. In his autobiography, he mourns: “Who is
wounded, and I am not wounded? For I bear in my body the marks of this battle” (22). He realises that one in tune with the spirit and tradition of his country will have a natural inclination to write in Welsh. The dilemma of the poet is discussed by Wintle who claims that it is “not an absurdity after all for a Welshman writing in English to mourn a language he doesn’t speak, or doesn’t write. What he is in fact mourning is a consciousness he hasn’t altogether lost” (278).

Thomas again addresses the Welsh-language problem in his essay “Cymru or Wales?” (1992). He claims that despite the existence of Welsh-language radio and television stations, despite the mandatory teaching of Welsh in secondary education, despite the existence of Welsh medium schools and colleges, Welsh as a tongue is doomed when it competes with English. He concedes that as English is the language of the government, the rich and of commerce, Welsh as a spoken language and a living culture, cannot flourish in the bilingual framework. Thomas mourns the corrosion of the pure native Welsh dialect in “The Old Language” (AL):

England, what have you done to make the speech

My fathers used a stranger at my lips,

An offence to the ear, a shackle on the tongue

That would fit new thoughts to an abiding tune. (1-4)

The slow music of the Welsh language evokes nostalgic memories of the past when craftsmen took pride in their work. Time spins backwards in “On
Hearing a Welshman Speak” (PS) and the language playing on the lips of literary and political figures loom up in reels that end with the sound of Welshmen hurrying to England.

Yet in “The Creative Writer’s Suicide,” Thomas acknowledges that English is a richer language, a language more responsive than Welsh to the thousands of demands made on it (Davies 21). He claims that for an Anglo-Welshman, English is a better medium for poetry as it enables him to be self-critical, an imperative quality in a good writer. In his essay “Cymru or Wales?” Thomas concedes that English “is a language of immense flexibility” and that “. . . England has evolved a medium, which is the envy of the world . . .” (11). Yet, to write of Wales in English is to write out of a contradiction. He still regards the English language as an alien language and hopes he could do without it. At its strongest, this sense of contradiction at the root of the poetic endeavour becomes self-disgust in “It Hurts Him to Think” (WW):

The industrialists came, burrowing
in the corpse of a nation
for its congealed blood. I was
born into the squalor of their feeding and sucked their speech
in with my mother’s infected milk, so that whatever
I throw up now is still theirs. (20-28)

Thomas offers a barbed welcome in “Welcome” (BT), where he warns tourists that though they may creep in through roads, the rail or through the air, they won’t get inside for “the old bar of speech” remains as an uncompromising guard. In disdain, Thomas refers to English language in “Expatriates” (PS): “Our tongues are coated with / A dustier speech,” (18-19) contrasting it with the smooth flow of “the cold stream’s sibilants” that constitute the Welsh language. The social plight of the people is to him a symptom of moral decay that accompanies the loss of the virginal state of “the soft consonants” of the Welsh language described in “Welsh Landscape” (AL). In “Reservoirs” (NBF), his passion springs from his conviction that the Welsh themselves have dug a grave for their language. In “Looking at Sheep” (BT) he condemns the English and refers to the English language as “their waste speech” (12).

The reason for this harsh tirade against the English language can be traced to his conviction that the Welsh culture is too precious to be lost and it contains seeds of moral redemption. Thomas considers the defence of the Welsh tongue as a resistance to a morally bankrupt order that, according to him, is part of the anglicisation of Wales. Thomas feels that, since there was a mother tongue that continued to exist in Wales, a proper Welshman could only look on English as a means of rekindling interest in the Welsh-language culture, and of leading people back to the mother tongue.
In *The Welsh Extremist*, Ned Thomas deals at length with the language issue. He claims that the Welsh language community consists of a series of groups that overlap with the non-Welsh-speaking Welsh. Even within the *Plaid Cymru*, there are some who deplore some of the extreme measures taken by the Welsh Language Society: “A different language does not assert one’s total difference from other groups of the human race, but it registers the degree of difference that in fact exists . . .” (32). Ned Thomas claims that the whole issue boils down to the question whether a small community, with its own unique way of life, can continue to exist. He says that “the Welsh speaker has to assert his identity, because this identity will otherwise not be respected” (31), and concedes that in present day Wales, maintaining the Welsh language requires a positive act of will, as television, advertising, the press, education etc., mediate in English. According to Thomas:

The English-speaking and Welsh-speaking Welsh are not two quite separate language groups who happen to be rubbing shoulders, . . . they are one group which has suffered a split in its consciousness and this produces a curious emotional ambivalence which can be exploited for conflict but which is also the hope for cultural and political solidarity. (110)

Welsh poetry fosters commitment to community. Bards in Wales held a respectable position in the society in the past and they were in tune with the political, social and economic aspects of life. Anglo-Welsh poets, who exist
today, are at a disadvantage because of the language they choose as the medium of communication. While Mathew Arnold concedes that the English could do with an infusion of Celtic temperament, he adds that the Welsh language is the “curse of Wales.” R. S. Thomas’s predicament with the language is one that he shares with two of his contemporaries, Raymond Garlick and Roland Mathias. In their struggle to establish their individual Welsh identities as they continue to write in English, Mathias and Garlick advocate a bilingual Wales. However Thomas’s determination to preserve the language of Wales is as uncompromising as the God he serves. He considers only those who speak the Welsh language to be Welsh. The agony of longing to think in one language and having to write in another language, results in severe ambivalences that reflect the crisis of identity in modern society.

Love and despair, in the age-old manner of the Celtic retreat, become the hallmark of Thomas’s poetry about Welsh themes. Even though he has relentlessly crusaded for a “Welsh Wales,” the majority of those living in Wales realise that the Welsh can only win their rights within the context of a British democratic socialism. Thomas’s ambivalent attitude to his nation is cabined, cribbed and confined in the question he poses in “The Lost” (NTF): “Will nobody / explain what it is like / to be born lost?” (13-15).