Chapter 5

Nature: Its Pitilessness and Its Beauty

Like mulberry leaves to silkworms is nature to the poet. His lifelong romance with the green world, cocooned in respect, wonder and empathy, is also tinged with an authentic portrayal of the malignant streak in her. Neither primitive nor modern in his outlook on nature, Thomas speaks of himself as a “nature mystic” (Ormond 51). In “A Year in Lleyn,” Thomas describes the rare, intense awakening of enlightenment; what he experiences as nature-mysticism, while standing on the edge of Tŷ Mawr pool:

At moments such as these, every problem concerning the purpose of life, death and morality disappears, and man feels in touch with existence, pure and simple. For a moment he is one with the creation, participating in the genius of life, as every creature in turn has done over millions of years. My name for such a rare, but not alien experience, is nature-mysticism. (122)

The constant companionship, wisdom, solace and insight that nature has offered him in the various parishes in which he ministered, is ever-green in his memory, and he acknowledges his debt to her in the exquisite poem “The River” (H’m):

I bring the heart

Not the mind to the interpretation

Of their music, letting the stream
Comb me, feeling it fresh
In my veins, revisiting the sources
That are as near now
As on the morning I set out from them. (9-15)

Yet, he does not seem strongly responsive to nature for its own sake.

Dark questions that snake through the mind are faced squarely as he attempts to make sense of this “pain’s landscape” where a “savage agriculture” is practised. In “Tenancies” (NBF) he states: “This is pain’s landscape. / A savage agriculture is practised / Here” (1-3). Thus, Thomas’s pasture of nature poetry is an amalgam of the instinctive joy in the benign and nurturing aspects of the pastoral tradition and a profound meditation like that of Hopkins on the fierce, deadly and harsh aspects of “Nature, red in tooth and claw” (56.15), referred to by Tennyson in In Memoriam. In “The Seasons” (MHT) he meditates on spring, summer, autumn and winter claiming: “I was the poet coming / to it for its nectar. I fed / full on the ambivalences of honey” (7-9).

This combination of realism and pastoralism occurs early in “Song” (AL), where the poet hoping to find “A green asylum from time’s range” (4), instead has to encounter, “. . . the harsh ways / Of the ruinous wind and the clawed rain” (5-6). Anthony Conran grapples with the same problem in his article “R. S. Thomas as a Mystical Poet,” when he comments on Thomas’s The Minister in which the poet fathoms a divinity in nature – “. . . God is in
the throat of a bird” (51). Conran poses the question: “what is . . . loving and yet willing that bird to die in agony?” (12).

The study of nature remains intellectually rewarding, spiritually edifying and aesthetically gratifying. Mankind has always cherished a deep, affectionate, emotional attachment with the green world. She provides respite from the tardy monotone of daily life and is a haven of release of hitherto repressed feelings, and the solitude she provides is conducive to the development of a strong sense of vitality. Some poets have found nature to be empathetic to their emotions. Others have dwelt on her cruel and indifferent aspects. Tillich, in The Shaking of the Foundations (83), unfolds a threefold viewpoint regarding the question as to what nature means to the human being. He claims that the psalmist praises the glory of nature (Ps. 19.2-5), the prophet portrays the tragedy of nature (Rom. 8.19-22), and the disciple proclaims the salvation of nature (Rev. 21.1, 22.1-2).

The thread of nature poetry ran through the Old English period and the Middle English period, with sketches in Chaucer, Langland and Gower. It emerged yet again during the Renaissance, which reawakened man to the significance of the green world. Shakespeare, Spenser, Sidney and Marlowe resorted to her as a rich resource for their poems and plays. The Augustans highlightened the need to “follow Nature.” During the eighteenth century, man was the measure of all things and poets pictured man and nature working together productively. They depicted nature as dependent on man to fulfil
herself. Pope, in his *Pastorals*, sought for the timeless and the universal in nature. In *An Essay on Man*, Pope meant to show how the earth declared the glory of God. The precursors of the Romantic age, particularly Thomson, Collins, Cowper and Blake sought to show that man needed the aid of nature to fulfil himself. Thomson’s *Seasons* described seasonal effects and stages in rural labour. Wordsworth spiritualised nature and reveled in depicting her august sentiments. Coloured by his “hyper-individualism,” his creed of mystical pantheism prompted him to endow her with living attributes.

“Tintern Abbey” traced the growth of the poet’s conception of nature in three stages from the time when she served as a background to his boyish sports, through the intermediate state of sensuous perception to the final stage of a communion with her when he could perceive the Eternal Spirit in nature.

Shelley intellectualised her and dabbled in her ecstasies. Keats saw her as a manifestation of beauty, and caroused in the sensuous aspects of her beauty.

Later, she also found her way into the poems of the Victorians, the pre-Raphaelites and the Georgians. Tennyson’s renderings of nature were characterized by clarity, minuteness and his scientific perceptions of her were modified by his poetic sensibility. To him, nature was a mirror that reflected human emotions and in his poetry, she served to accentuate those moods.

Browning’s treatment of nature was original in many ways. His love of nature was cosmopolitan and he could convey the colours in a natural scene with remarkable accuracy. Arnold’s landscapes often form a neutral
background in which action takes place. The characteristic melancholy that marks his poetry partially springs from his desire and failure to unite nature and human society. Hardy’s meditative descriptions of the Wessex countryside, in all seasons and weathers, were primarily elegiac in tone. The accuracy and starkness evident in Hopkins’s empathetic cognition of plants, birds and natural phenomena is an area worth studying. Modern poets have also integrated themselves in rural areas, and developed new ways of interpreting what they see around them.

Thomas spent most of his life as a country parson among the Welsh-speaking hill farmers of Powys and Gwynedd in central Wales. He had a keen eye for the many-sided aspects of the part of Wales that he wrote about, which was harsh as well as beautiful. In “Words and the Poet,” Thomas wrote about the benefits of a living in the countryside:

The two things that appeal most strongly to my imagination are Wales and nature, especially as the latter manifests itself as a background to a way of life. I believe that there is a profound and lasting value in both concepts. . . . The common environment of the majority is an urban industrial one. The political audience of a poet is one of town-dwellers, who are mainly out of touch, if not of sympathy with nature. Their contact with it is modified by the machine . . . And this is a
problem, which all poets must face. I don’t believe for a moment the superiority of urban to country life. (83)

Thomas believed that anyone who was in touch with life of the Welsh countryside had experienced something too strong, too deep to be adapted to another world. His flair in describing the hills, the snow-topped mountains, the bleak landscape, the steep, narrow, windswept valleys, the wilderness of bracken and heather, the rocky areas with rough tracks and the isolated farms can be discerned in his poetry.

Thomas’s views on nature lie scattered throughout the whole body of his poetry and in some of the prose pieces. “A Year in Lleyn” is a warm tribute to the beauty of nature. This month-by-month description of the outdoor world, relishes the hues of the changing seasons. It focuses on sights and sounds: the whistle of the cuckoo (130), the blue colour of the waves (137), the change in the shape and colour of the clouds (146), the fragrance of bluebells, honeysuckles, dog roses (147) and the quality of light over a hill (168). The bulwark of his poetic output is built upon a simple foundation of earth and water, fire, air, mountains and seas, the sky, stars, snow, rain, the sun and the moon, trees, plants, birds and wild creatures. Deceptively unassuming though they may seem, they become pliant tools, as the poet fashions out poignant lines that often move to tears. In “Cyclamen” (SF), he describes moths:

They are white moths
With wings
Lifted
Over a dark water
In act to fly
Yet stayed
By their frail images
In its mahogany depths. (1-8)

They provide him with what he describes in “Somewhere” (LS) as the “pollen you shall work up / into the honey the mind feeds on” (8-9). The leaf, water, tree, sea and bird images constantly recur in the poems. The pastime of bird watching he often indulged in is described in “Bird-Watching” (NTF), and in the poem he contemplates on the ability of the heart to shuttle between the heights and depths of thought. The sea, a source of fascination for the poet from childhood, finds mention in many poems – “The Cat and the Sea” (PS), “Sailor Poet” (PS), “The Island” (H’m), “Boatman” (YO), “Harbour” (YO), “Aside” (MHT), “Island” (NTF) etc. In some poems nature provides the background in which the muse functions, and in others she offers a launching pad to speculative thought.

Thomas’s perception of nature is grounded in evolution too. He discerns that the individual is just a link in the mighty chain of life. “A Blackbird Singing” (PS) is a simple, profound poem in which the instinctive
filial bond between man and nature unite the “rich music” of the bird with the
perception of the tragic dynasty of the human races.

It seems wrong that out of this bird
Black, bold, a suggestion of dark
Places about it, there yet should come
Such rich music, as though the notes’
Ore were changed to a rare metal
At one touch of that bright bill.

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

A slow singer, but loading each phrase
With history’s overtones, love, joy
And grief learned by his dark tribe. (1-6, 11-13)

The individual belongs to its species, and the blackbird, like Keats’s
nightingale takes on a universalised meaning for Thomas. It also partly
embodies Shelley’s vision of the community of all living things.

Both Thomas and Wordsworth present primitive man, raw and
vulnerable before her mighty presence. However, while Wordsworth’s
herdsman is in empathy with and spiritually nourished by her, Thomas sees
the farmer wrestling against the elements. The unease, irony and compassion
that fluctuate through his poems about the peasant farmers, emerge from his
awe at the dignity of their response to the harsh earth’s demands and the stoic
virtues they develop during the long hours spent in the fields.
This chapter examines the ambivalence in Thomas’s theology of nature. The positive influence of nature on him is examined first, which is dealt with in two parts, namely, the poems that depict the benevolence of nature and those that depict his nature mysticism. The next part explores Thomas’s struggle with a darker side of nature, succumbing to an economy subject to violence and consumption.

His attachment to the green world began in his childhood and youth in Holyhead, where the weather defined all his activities. He would rise early in the morning, steal out into the countryside and bask in the glory of the newly born day. His autobiography gives us ample instances of the early, sensuous perceptions of the natural phenomena – the joy he experienced while tuning into the sounds of the sea, feeling the eggs in nests, scanning the fields for birds, climbing mountains and gazing at the stars at night. The unconscious impressions gleaned as a boy were later reinforced at Chirk, where he was a curate, when he began reading the nature poems of Wordsworth, Tennyson and Edward Thomas. This rapport which coagulated in Holyhead and Chirk, later crystallized in Manafon where he became part of the rural setup. The long walks he took in the afternoons, the hours spent in the woods at Eglwysfach, the trips to the bird sanctuary in the Lleyn peninsula, the proximity of the sea at Aberdaron and his participation in the campaigns against the slaughter of birds introduced him to the rhythms of life. The impulses registered in the mind, became the source of his poetry: “In my
contact with others or out in the world of nature, I see something and decide that it has poetic possibilities” (qtd. in Bedient 55). It was a feast that never lost its impact on his palate, a memory that lingered as an oasis of comfort in hard times, when he was frustrated by the daily wear and tear of a ministry among tough, hardened peasants and a life-long habit that never lost its appeal.

Many of his poems attest to the gratification derived from tuning in to the green world and the psycho-spiritual health that the integration affords. In The Echoes Return Slow (27), he speaks of how his world revolves around “the tall woods”:

   Myself I need the tall woods,
   so church-like, for through their stained
   windows and beneath the sound
   of the spirit’s breathing I concede a world. (5-8)

In “Valediction” (AL), he praises “the beauty / And grace that trees and flowers labour to teach” (22-23) and “the soft influence / Of birds” (25-26). He accords the farmer’s gauche to his refusal to submit to their influence. He claims that the earth is throbbing with life in “Alive” (LS), and in “A Day in Autumn” (PS), Thomas concedes the regenerative and recuperative factors concealed in the panorama:

   Having looked up
   From the day’s chores, pause a minute,
Let the mind take its photograph

Of the bright scene, something to wear

Against the heart in the long cold. (6-10)

In “The Tree” (AL), the poet endorses his belief in an older way of life and the highest seal of “Welshness” is associated with the song of birds in the shade of trees and the streams that absorb the music. The freshness and fragrance of the roses in “Rose Cottage” (P) that generates warmth, the “scent of hay” (12) wafting through the open window of a speeding car in “The Earth Does its Best for Him” (WW), the music of “Rhiannon’s birds high / in the branches, calling to us / to forget time” (12-14) and “the rustle / of unseen water / falls” (22-24) in “Afallon” (NTF), the spontaneous joy at the discovery and fingering of “the smooth shell / Of eggs in the cupped nest” (14-15) in “Children’s Song” (SYT), the beauty of the valley in “The Valley Dweller” (WI), the thrill that courses through him as he watches a flock of birds erupting from the woods in “Evening” (BHN), the snake in “Adder” (LP) that becomes the “scion / of a mighty ancestor” (6-7) and the moth in “Moth” (MHT), that embodies the knowledge of how “to exist / without asking” (6-7), become the manifestations of what he describes in “Enigma” (SYT) – “The earth is beautiful” (10). In “Memories” (SYT), the farmer’s eyes reveal the “heart’s rich harvest” (20), a confluence of wheat, barley, oats, fields of grain, grass, snow and lambs. The boy in “Farm Child” (AL) grows
mature through a tactile perception of nature and “The Lonely Furrow” (AL) reaffirms the pride and satisfaction derived from a close bond with the earth.

In his autobiography, Thomas endorses the wisdom of observing birds:

Birds existed millions of years before the advent of man. They are beautiful and full of life, and have adapted perfectly to their own needs. Man has for ages yearned to be able to fly, and at last he has succeeded at the expense of exhausting the earth of its resources and polluting it, and of filling the sky with unbearable tumult. Twice a year millions of birds rise into the air without much noise, without any harmful effect on the environment, to winter in warmer countries for a few months and to return in the spring to raise a new family. . . . R. S. would marvel at how miraculous the creation [birds] was. (99-100)

He recalls how, in the dark days of the war, a blue tit started singing one January, raising his spirits, adding, “Life is stronger than death” (118). The poet records in “Night Sky” (F), how he imbibes life force through a process of self-emptying at night. The sediments of doubt, frustration and exhaustion that clog the mind daily and block the vital flow of energy that enables one to keep going, are rinsed at night. Like Herbert and Hopkins, Thomas enjoys watching the stars. The steady empowerment by the stars provides nourishment to battle the odds of life.

Every night
is a rinsing myself of the darkness

that is in my veins. I let the stars inject me

with fire, silent as it is far,

but certain in its cauterising

of my despair. (11-16)

In “Arrival” (LP), he acknowledges his debt and gratitude to the protective influence of the canopy of “the moon’s halo / above him” (16-17). He describes how the moon waxes and wanes throughout the centuries with “no one to introduce / him to earth’s bustling creatures / but his love . . .” (20-22) in “Lunar” (NTF). “Making” (H’m) is an evolutionary account of the creation of moss, grass, animals, flowers and birds. The beast menagerie in “Bestiary” (NTF) includes reflections on the owl, the mice, the mosquito, the snake, the goat, the tiger, the bear and the lizard. The sight of the newts lying in the pool on the mountain leads him to speculative thought:

Here

everything happens:

pain, bliss, hunger –

but what are a newt’s

thoughts? (11-15)

In “The Tables Turned,” Wordsworth advises his friend to come to nature to learn through passive receptivity:

Let Nature be your Teacher
One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can. (16, 21-24)

Thomas evinces similar perspectives. In _The Minister_, Thomas implies that the Reverend Elias Morgan fails in his vocation because he did not wait upon the generous liturgy of the natural order – “He never listened to the hills’ / Music calling to the hushed / Music within” (561-563). Ward acquiesces: “An underlying theme of ‘The Minister’ is that the way to broaden one’s mind and spirit, to oneself as well as to the community and wider world, must be through openness to nature” (40). In “Valediction” (AL), Thomas acquiesces that “the hills had grace” (6). In “Swifts” (P), the grace in nature goes beyond natural grace, and the poet learns to bring “Only my wonder to the contemplation / Of the geometry of their dark wings” (19-20).

The beauty of nature steals into his mind, tingling through sensuous perceptions. The poet within is set aflame, and as reason steps in, transcends into apocalyptic depths of insight. This union is celebrated in _The Echoes Return Slow_, in which he refers to “the marriage of mind and nature” (58). The soul-cleansing experience on top of a mountain, described in “Alpine” (T), echoes a parallel process in the mind, which “has its own level to find” (10). Such precious moments, spent alone on the heights, enable him to
penetrate the depths of the soul. Things are placed in their right perspective, and one gradually becomes conscious of the insignificance of the human existence in the mighty universe. Gray and Walpole crossed the Alps in 1739, and their enthusiastic reports inspired others to turn to mountains as a source of inspiration. During the eighteenth century, many poems and novels were based on the mountains of Snowdonia in Wales.

The poem “Flowers” (BHN) becomes a platform for contemplative thought, reminding one of the flowers twice removed from reality, and providing a window through which one can catch a glimpse of eternity. In “Mediterranean” (BHN), he contemplates on the maturing human spirit: “The water is the same; / it is the reflections are different” (1-2). The endless texts oozing up from the sea are referred to in The Echoes Return Slow. Anticipating the changes in the liturgy of the church and unwilling to implement them, Thomas considered the prospect of stepping completely aside. The sea reflected his wavering impulses: “But the sea revises itself over and over. When he arose in the morning or looked at it at night, it was always at a new version of it” (ERS 102). Contrary forces within Thomas’s makeup coalesce in “Green Categories” (PS), in which Iago, by being linked with Kant, is raised to a new dignity, while Kant is elevated to a new insight. The farmer and the philosopher seem to share the same knowledge under the firmament, with the difference being in the order in which it is dissipated. In “Groping” (F), the poet turns inward for introspection and focuses on how
Wordsworth internalised the impulses from the woods to concoct poetry. In “The Untamed” (BT), he contrasts the peace experienced in his garden with the “deep peace / of wild places” (7-8). In “It” (LP), he wonders at the leap of knowledge, “growing / into a tree” (23-24), with the prospect of it being “lightning struck” (25) looming in the background.

In “Out of the Hills” (SF), he salutes the infinite patience of mother earth that waits for the farmer to return to her. Though he often strays, the poet says that “. . . the earth is patient, he is not lost” (26). The same sentiment is repeated in “Country Cures” (BT), where he implies that one has only to turn to nature “To learn patience” (2). The “gentleness / Of green nature” (3-4) is recorded in “The Green Isle” (NBF). In “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” (WA), Thomas implies that freedom of thought emanates from an unmechanised countryside.

A nineteenth century

calm;

that is, a countryside

not fenced in

by cables and pylons,

but open to thought to blow in

from as near as may be

to the truth. (20-27)
The farmer’s life, doomed to a drab existence in the inclement weather, can nevertheless be redeemed, he claims in “Iago Prytherch” (SF), “if you can . . . after the earth’s laws / Order your life and faith . . .” (7, 10-11). In “This One” (H’m), the farmer purges himself of the forbidden fruits of the world, by his fidelity to his task at hand – his work in the fields. Davis’s illness, in “Priest and Peasant” (SYT), is attributed to his inability to outgrow the initial disharmony that may arise when the farmer first attempts to plumb the earth’s womb.

“The Evacuee” (AL), an idyllic pastoral poem, traces the healing power of “earth’s charity” (32), which soothes the child waiting fearfully for the warning of air-raids. In “Echoes” (H’m), wounded “creation” turns to nature for relief: “Nature bandaged / Its wounds. Healing in / The smooth sun, . . .” (9-11). “The Garden” (BT), is a poem that clearly defines Thomas’s attitude towards the green world. The garden becomes a haven of solitude, and enables man to regain his spiritual bearings.

It is the old kingdom of man.

Answering to their names,

Out of the soil the buds come,

The silent detonations

Of power wielded without sin. (10-14)

In the last stanza, the garden is perceived as a vestige of Eden. Though man is tainted by original sin, the flowers and grass bear within them, recuperative
properties that can enable man to heal himself. Knapp claims: “This poem illuminates . . . earth . . . as redemptive to man . . .” (7).

“Lore” (T) poses a question and provides the answer – an answer that is a personal revelation that has crystallized after many incidents of personal experience:

What to do? Stay green.

Never mind the machine,

Whose fuel is human souls.

Live large, man, and dream small. (17-20)

One perceives that Thomas not only cherishes a deep sensuous attachment to nature, but also conceives of it as nurturing in its action.

Thomas’s attitude to nature is sacramental too. In many poems, he mingles elements of the divine with natural phenomena. In his autobiography, he writes, “Thomas Aquinas believed that God revealed Himself according to the creature’s ability to receive Him. If He did this to R. S., He chose to do so through the medium of the world of nature” (106). Later, in the South Bank Show, Thomas reiterates that God chooses to reveal Himself to people in different ways, and He chose to do so, to Thomas, through the natural world.

Nature and religion are brought together either through allusion to a biblical text, or in direct sacramental reference. In “The Bright Field” (LS), the poet coalesces an experience he had with the kingdom of heaven in the
parable of the pearl (Matt. 13.45) and that of the field with the treasure in it (Matt. 13.44).

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
the treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it.

The natural experience of sunlight flooding a field transcends to a realm of pure mysticism, by being related to the two gospel parables. Thomas underscores the transitoriness of such experiences, which can lead to spiritual insights. The *rosa mystica* in “The Flower” (LS) stands for contemplation on spiritual riches, teaching man that he must “withdraw / to possess . . .” (5-6).

The same principle emerges in Luke 12.16-21, in which the Lord teaches his disciples the importance of laying up treasures in heaven and the insignificance of earthly riches. Thomas’s discernment of the presence of God in “the tree / that at moments / you are ablaze in” (5-7), in “Something More” (MHT) parallels Moses’s vision on Mount Horeb. Existence, he states in “Afon Rhiw” (MHT), is standing patiently “for a while / amid flux” (14-15), reminding one of Biblical injunction: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps.
“Sea-Watching” (LS), a beautiful poem permeated with spirituality that emanates from natural experiences, poses the question of the psalmist: “How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself for ever” (Ps. 89.46-47). In his autobiography, Thomas finds parallels in the hobby of watching birds and prayer.

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

The revelation through contact with the green world enables one to understand the scriptures better, while the images in the Bible lead to clarity of vision and perception with regard to nature. Cox concedes, “For Thomas in his early poetry, Nature’s beauty is sacramental” (221).

The sacramental vision “In Great Waters” (F) and the sacramental references to baptism in “The Moon in Lleyn” (LS) are microcosms of a larger cosmos beyond comprehension. “The Moon in Lleyn” (LS) is replete with Christian imagery and parochial observation, which speculate on the operations of time. “There is a sacrament there more beauty / the terror . . .”
(11-13), the poet concedes in “In Great Waters” (F), standing at the foot of a steep flow of water. There are also sacramental references to confession in “Night Sky” (F) and to prayer in “The Prayer” (LS), in which the image of the cross shedding leaves that wash away the poet’s sins is based on a personal memory of an ash-tree in the vicarage shedding leaves in autumn. Eucharistic references abound throughout his poetry and allusions to matrimony recur in The Echoes Return Slow.

“Alive” (LS) is modelled on George Herbert’s poems in which the earth, the sea and the wind are alive with a mystical presence:

Many creatures

reflect you, the flowers

your colour, the tides the precision

of your calculations. There

is nothing too ample

for you to overflow, nothing

so small that your workmanship

is not revealed. (6-13)

This mystical “presence” is reminiscent of the “presence that disturbs me with joy” (96) in Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.” In “Suddenly” (LP), God speaks to him “with the fluency / of water, the articulateness / of green leaves” (4-6) and the rock becomes “the library / of his poetry” (9-10). In “The Indians and
the Elephant” (NTF), the narrator associates his God-experience with the
wind, the fire and the flower:

    Sometimes he is
    a wind, carrying me off;
sometimes a fire devouring
me. Rarely, too rarely
he is as the scent
at the heart of a great flower
I lean over and fall
into. (9-16)

    The magnetic attraction of the woods and the moor, where he could
experience a flooding of grace is the subject of many poems. In The Echoes
Return Slow, he claims that though his conscience prodded him to spend
more time in study, the attraction of the woods was greater: “But the fields
were too strong. The woods were holier than a cathedral” (ERS 26). The
moor in “Moorland” (EA) and “The Moor” (P) becomes “. . . a church to me.
/ I entered it on soft foot” (1-2). In his autobiography, he also describes “the
quiet and beauty of the moorland,” adding that “the countryside was
indispensable to his faith” (84). According to Randal Jenkins:

    For R. S. Thomas no philosophy of nature which omits a direct
acknowledgement of God’s central place in the scheme of
things can provide an adequate understanding of man. In his
poetry, life on the land is examined in a specifically Christian perspective. The most painful of realizations for the poet committed to a belief in the moral influence of a life close to nature, is that without faith in the transcendental God, it is nothing. (86)

Thomas postulates the need of turning aside and toning the mind into a posture of stillness if one is to get in touch with the essence of life. Nature, according to the poet, holds the key of access to the Promised Land – if, and only if, one is willing to step apart and wait with the patience of Job. In “Expostulation and Reply,” Wordsworth also refers to the “wise passiveness” (24), which is the greatest gift that nature bestows upon man. In the preface he wrote for A Choice of Wordsworth’s Verse, he refers to and approves of Wordsworth’s practice of spending time in quiet contemplation, with the inner eye open: “He believed in the quiet mind, the inward eye; the time for contemplation” (14).

In his essay, “A Thicket in Lleyn,” Thomas describes an encounter in a sanctuary of comfort that he often visits in Lleyn. The thicket is quiet. Thomas approaches in silence, and patiently, he tunes himself to the resonance of the milieu. Gradually, he is forgotten, as the life of the thicket is resumed. Suddenly, the place is filled with a number of migrating goldcrests, and the air is charged with their shrill cries and then their tiny hovering bodies. In a twinkling of a second, they disappear, leaving the poet,
bewildered and in awe, having been rocketed back to reality after a few, precious moments of experiencing the “Infinite I” (95-96). This is Thomas’s experience of nature-mysticism. It begins with an ordinary natural experience that suddenly assumes wider implications. His soul responds to the Infinite soul that has emerged for a just a little while, and then his mind returns to its former state. The encounter with this “Infinite I” is rewarding, though bewildering. In “Where Do We Go from Here?” Thomas refers to this vision, as it has appeared to other poets. To Francis Thomson, it constituted “a space,” to Eliot, it was a “still point,” to Wordsworth, it was the “central peace, subsisting at the heart of endless agitation” (151-152). He says that men long for mystical revelation, without realizing that is all around us. However, it necessitates a period of preparation. One has to turn aside, be still and wait patiently for this flash of revelation. The fleeting nature of such moments is often stressed. The sun illuminates the field “for a while” (3), in “The Bright Field” (LS). In “That Place” (LS), he describes “instances” when he sought to recapture the enervating effect of the pure, fresh air emanating from the seas.

In “Wrong?” (NTF), he ponders on this question of turning aside. The fever and the fret that seeps into man’s consciousness in a technology-driven world, cripples his faculties for “stepping / aside” (20-21), to discern the “presence” in the “still pool” (16) or by the “tree of quietness” (17). In “Aside” (MHT), he reiterates the wisdom of turning aside:
Progress

is not with the machine;

it is a turning aside,

a bending over a still pool,

where the bubbles arise

from unseen depths, far from truth

breathing, showing us by their roundness

the roundness of our world. (25-32)

This leads him to make himself part of nature and in “Sea-Watching” (LS), he claims: “I became the hermit / of the rocks, habited with the wind. . .” (17-18). Another prose piece gives a deeper insight into Thomas’s nature-mysticism. His absolute need to find himself in barren places is examined in “The Mountains.” The charm of this piece of writing, which revolves around its visionary quality, and its recollections of “a lost Eden” and “a lost childhood”, are reminiscent of Wordsworth’s “Ode on Intimations of Immortality.” At the summit of the mountain, beyond the “human stain,” all is forgotten. Men escape to the mountains to seek for peace where they can conquer and calm the turbulent emotions that wreck the mind. Thomas’s philosophy of comprehending a mystical experience in nature is thus bound up in hope and intuition.

The paradoxical element in the world of nature is also a subject of fascination for the poet. Her blank indifference, at times, to the travails of
puny mortals, becomes an issue of concern. The monotonous drudgery endured over the years by the farmers, battling inhuman conditions on the infertile terrain, yields but a pittance, and demands huge returns. The book of Job also presents the terrible power of nature, symbolised in the images of Behemoth and Leviathan. Many questions arise in the poet’s mind, pertaining to the apparent unfairness and imbalance in the order of natural things. Sometimes, it appears to the poet that the truth he has always been in search of, is totally lacking in the green world. Thomas, like Tennyson and Hughes, thus plugs into the tumult, the indifference and even the malevolence coursing through nature.

The question of violence is of perennial interest to him. He ponders over the question of the survival of the fittest in a natural world that is the handiwork of a God of Love. Isaiah’s vision (11.6-9), where the predator and the prey exist harmoniously together seems a wonderful one, a peaceful paradise that anyone would hope for. However, the instinctive predatory nature of the universe poses a riddle. “Killing is a part of their way of life,” he says in his autobiography, adding:

The young rector would himself see the birds of prey hunting and the weasel and the stoat going about their bloody work . . . One of the unfailing rules of that world is that life has to die in the cause of life. If there is any other way on this earth, God has not seen fit to follow it. This is a doctrine that plays straight into
the hands of the strong. As far as this world is concerned, Isaiah’s vision of the wolf dwelling with the lamb, and the leopard lying down with the kid is a myth. The economy doesn’t work like that. And too often in this world, the race is to the swift, the battle to the strong. (95-6)

In “Questions to the Prophet” (MHT), he rephrases his question: “How will the lion remain a lion / if it eats straw like the ox?” (1-2). The farmer in “The Parish” (T), does not only listen to the bird singing but also watches “The sharp tooth tearing its prey” (13). The question asked in “Pisces” (SYT), masks a deeper question as to what kind of a God can permit such cycles of violence:

Who said to the trout,

You shall die on Good Friday

To be food for a man

And his pretty lady?

It was I, said God.

Who formed the roses

In the delicate flesh

And the tooth that bruises. (1-8)

In “Ah” (P), he envisages a God who “fashions the world / from such torment” (7-8) and creatures that contribute their “tribute of blood” (9). “Nature may be awesome and beautiful, but the poet is soberly aware that
neither it nor the God who created it is benign” (Gitzen 176). In “Rough” (LS), the ecosystem is brutally reduced to a system that thrives on violence:

God looked at the eagle that looked at
the wolf that watched the jack-rabbit
cropping the grass, green and curling
as God’s beard. He stepped back;
it was perfect, a self-regulating machine
of blood and faeces. (1-6)

Christ had promised that the meek would inherit the earth, but this promise stands in blatant contradiction to what is being perpetuated around. The basic instinct for food paves the way for the paradox that life should be snuffed out for the cause of life. In his essay “A Thicket in Lleyn,” he laments over the fate of the goldcrests, “. . . to be themselves devoured later . . .” (101). In “A Year in Lleyn,” Thomas, alert to the mewing of a hungry sparrow hawk, preparing to launch an attack, claims: “In some ways, and at times, it is quite terrifying. Couldn’t God have done better than to make the earth some giant mouth which devours, devours unceasingly in order to sustain itself?” (170). In “The Mass of Christ” (NTF), he wonders “What love sentenced / us to murder in order / that we survive? . . . We prey / and are preyed on” (12-14, 17-18). This “problem of killing” (107), described in his autobiography is one that perplexes the poet and leads him to a philosophical scrutiny of the paradoxical duality of nature. Tennyson, in his In Memoriam, had also
examined this dilemma, and Thomas acknowledges the influence in his autobiography (78). “Tennyson’s reading in evolutionary science temporarily convinced him of the malevolence of nature” (Ryals 216).

In section 55 of *In Memoriam*, nature’s law seems to shake Tennyson’s optimism, his faith that good will come out of evil. Nature’s law insists on the sacrifice of the individual for the welfare of the race. The brutal struggle for existence leads to a heavy loss of life.

So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life;

And finding that of fifty seeds
She often brings but one to bear. (7-8, 11-12)

These lines record Tennyson’s first shock after reading Lyell and Chambers. Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, dealt with the theme of the changes in the earth’s surface, brought about by the operation of natural forces. Robert Chambers, in his *Vestiges of Creation*, describes the existence of evil in the form of the struggle for existence in nature, i.e., the predator preying on weaker animals (316). In despair, Tennyson turns to God, only to be disappointed. The evidence he discerns in nature, refutes the vision of the “Holy Plan,” that Wordsworth found in her. The desolate background of “Mariana” and the melancholic autumnal touches in “Tithonus” also reflect
the seamy side of nature. In part I (IV, 4) of *Maud*, he draws attention to the cruelty and bloodshed that is evident in nature’s law:

For nature is one with rapine, a harm no preacher can heal;

The Mayfly is torn by the swallow, the sparrow speared by the shrike,

And the whole little wood where I sit is a world of plunder and prey. (123-125)

Unable to reconcile to the disturbing absence of meaning in a universe that operates on a principle of obliteration of the weak and yet, conscious of the mysterious divinity and benign presence that simultaneously emerges through nature, Thomas continues his probe in other areas, only to be confronted by new aberrations. In “He” (H’m), the exhausted poet fumbles for support in a “harsh landscape” (14), but is rejected by the sea and “his poetry dries on the rocks” (13). “Earth” (H’m) presents a land emptied of Godhead. In “The Hill Farmer Speaks” (AL), the tyranny of the land that lays its claws on the farmer is deplored: “I am the farmer, stripped of love / And thought and grace by the land’s hardness” (1-2). “Thomas reveals a shifting attitude toward nature: the earth provides, to be sure, but not without exacting its toll” (Adkins 254). Job Davies, at the age of eighty-five, in “Lore” (T), remains healthy and alert despite “the treachery of the seasons” (4). In “The Country” (YO), the mundane routine and monotony of an uneventful life in the country seeps into the fabric of life:
I would say to them

About living, in the country, peace

Can deafen one, beauty surprise

No longer. (14-17)

Thomas records in his autobiography that, though he conscientiously tried to minister in the countryside at Manafon, the grinding reality of daily routine finally got on his nerves, and that was one of the reasons that he opted for Eglwysfach (62-63). In “January” (SYT), the snow, though anthropomorphised by being given feelings and hands, is yet incapable of feeling pity and offering healing: “Over the snow that feels no pity, / Whose white hands can give no healing, / The fox drags its wounded belly” (5-7). In “Aim” (EA), the poet poses questions that have perplexed him through the years:

A voice out of the land –

animal, vegetable, mineral –

‘The pain, the beauty – Why, why, why?

Tell me the truth, give me understanding.’ (1-5)

The poet admits in “No Through Road” (SYT) that he is often thwarted in his attempt to penetrate the spirit of the universe through the medium of nature:

All in vain. I will cease now

My long absorption with the plough,
With the tame and the wild creatures
And man united with the earth.
I have failed after many seasons
To bring truth to birth,
And nature’s simple equations
In the mind’s precincts do not apply. (1-8)

However, he realizes that the modern world, embroiled in the wake of new discoveries, holds no attraction for him so much so that the “old lie / Of green places . . .” (11-12) continue to lure him by a magnetic power. In “Amen” (P), he refers to the lack of response from nature, “The cold landscape returned my stare; / There was no answer” (12-13). The mind-boggling indifference of nature to the numerous doubts and perplexities that often throng through his mind, when in a disturbed state is brought out in the poem “That” (NBF):

Other men will come as I have
To stand here and beat upon it
As on a door, and ask for love,
For compassion, for hatred even; for anything
Rather than this blank indifference,
Than the neutrality of its answers, if they can be called, answers
The grey skies, these wet fields,
With the wind’s winding sheet upon them. (2-9)
Vimala Herman reiterates: “Nature, which should normally reveal ‘evidence’ of its creator, remains mute under interrogation, stubborn in its materiality, silent to the challenge of any other truth” (144). “Autumn on the Land” (SYT) ends in a crisp statement:

You must revise

Your bland philosophy of nature, earth

Has of itself no power to make men wise. (13-15)

In “Then” (P), Thomas refers to a time in his life when the discrepancies in nature that register in his mind now, were not so clearly defined as they are now. There is an all-encompassing sense of acceptance of the mysterious and discordant elements that sound alternatively in the universe. He seems to imply that some of the contradictions apparent in nature should be accepted on their own terms. Belinda Humfrey points out that though there is a rejection of the Wordsworthian thesis of the beneficial influence of the natural world in poems like “Autumn on the Land” (SYT) and “No Through Road” (SYT), other poems like “The Gap in the Hedge” (AL) hold images of hope (165).

This becomes a part of Thomas’s “conclusion” regarding the “problem of nature.” There is no attempt on his part to decipher a point of intersection. He examines and exposes the duality in nature and leaves it at that, waiting for further revelation. “Unlike Tennyson, Thomas consistently resists the lure of an easy or artificial ‘answer’ to that paradox and is willing to face, finally,
no answer, absence, acceptance of the mystery of these cycles of natural violence older than humankind, not as evil but as simply mysterious” (Morgan 79).

The world of nature provides the distance that enables him to view the human world from the right perspective. “Islandmen” (YO), perhaps best represents Thomas’s unique stance with reference to nature. It does not depict an instance of epiphany, nor does it delineate the violence often found in nature. Rather, the sailors, though weary and exhausted, are engrossed in what they do all day long. This singleness of purpose enables them to preserve their equanimity by reconciling themselves to the twin faces of the sea, and thereby to the contradictory forces inherent in the natural world – “its pitilessness, its beauty” (21). Tony Brown states:

If the sea emblematises the complexity of the natural universe, “its pitilessness, its beauty,” the determined struggle against the sea for survival becomes in R. S. Thomas’s poetry in the 1970s and 1980s, an image of the necessary resilience of the believer, struggling to maintain his faith in a supposedly loving God who is also capable of creating such a seemingly merciless world. (“The Sea” 162)

The next chapter focuses on this important aspect of Thomas’s poetry.