Chapter 6

*Deus Absconditus*

Thomas conceives of God as the Ultimate Reality, and religious poetry as the sacred medium of that reality. In his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, Thomas defines religious poetry as the “imaginative representation” of “an experience of ultimate reality” (9). He is indebted to Bishop Robinson who claims: “Belief in God is a matter of ‘what you take seriously without any reservation,’ of what for you is ultimate reality” (55). According to Paul Tillich, “Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned” (*Dynamics* 1).

The year 1972 marked a turning point in the career of the poet. With the publication of *H’m*, readers realized that the poet was on the threshold of a new venture, that of seeking empirical evidence of a Presence in the Absence that pervaded the universe. The central subject of much of Thomas’s poetry of the last decade “is the complex relationship between faith and doubt, between a theology of presence and a theology of absence” (Vicary 100). During the earlier period of his career, Thomas had probed the vast exterior world, exploring the rugged world of Wales. However, by the time he writes “Groping” (F) the poet, like Eliot and Wordsworth, has started to probe the world of the interior, claiming: “The best journey to make / is inward. It is the interior / that calls” (4-6). As he gropes his way through this baffling terrain, seeking myths for healing and loving, he is constantly
accosted by experiences of affirmation and negation. The frustration of becoming a vehicle for the apocalyptic possibility that fails to materialize is conveyed in “The Porch” (F):

he looked out on a universe
that was without knowledge
of him and kept his place
there for an hour on that lean
threshold, neither outside nor in. (15-19)

The small boy in Holyhead, shouting at imaginary presences at the head of the stairs, only to discover that there was nothing there, was being initiated into a religious experience dominated by absence and silence. Later, as a priest, he was to wrestle for longer periods with such intimidating gaps. People who are intimate with Thomas claim that his fascination with God’s absence came less from reading theology than from serving throughout his adult working life, as a minister in the harsh Welsh countryside. He often pondered, during the long, cold hours in his study, on the crudity he encountered at Manafon and the snobbishness of the elite at Eglwysfach and of his role there. He wondered where God was in such places. “Which” (LS) is charming in delineating a universal question:

And in the book I read:

God is love.

But lifting
my head, I do not find it so. (1-4)

The shift to a new parish in 1967 enabled Thomas to enjoy what he had always longed for, to be in the midst of native Welsh people. Having no longer felt the need to write about Welsh themes and Wales, Thomas now embarked on a new journey to explore a vista that had sporadically been the subject of earlier poems. “Affinity” (SF), “In a Country Church” (SYT), “Pietà” (P), “The Moor” (P), “The Belfry” (P) and “Kneeling” (NBF), are some poems that reflect the complexity of Thomas’s religious vision.

“The Moor” (P) becomes a milieu for a profound mystical experience, which culminates in sacrament – the breaking of bread. The mystery of God’s grace bestowed freely on the great and the small is embedded in the insight that involves not finding a point in all things. The nadir in the spiritual life of a person recorded in “The Belfry” (P), shifts as the deep gloom is pierced by a ray of hope. Most of his best religious poems are to be found in the three volumes: H’m, Laboratories of the Spirit and Frequencies. “The central concern in these three volumes is the poet’s exploration of the nature of the Deity . . .” (Morris, “Mr. Thomas’s” 236). As in the poems of Herbert and Hopkins, Thomas’s poems delineate a quest of the Unfathomable Mystery, and his response to the spiritual need of man is not that of a Welshman only, but that of a human being who partakes of the universal mind. John Mole states that Thomas has “. . . become much more the companion of Herbert and Hopkins, an awkward, contentious believer who
struggles through paradox after paradox with a saviour who has all the odds” (“On the Recent” 216).

Thomas’s religious views have been influenced by Bishop Robinson’s Honest to God, by Paul Tillich’s The Shaking of the Foundations and by the tenets proposed by Plato, Spinoza, Bishop Berkeley, Nietzsche, Kant, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. Without shirking recent advances in the fields of science and technology and ever conscious of the difficulty of wielding language in a befitting manner so as to successfully mediate a religious sense, the poet engages in a restless pursuit. In “Somewhere” (LS) he asks: “Surely there exists somewhere, / as the justification for our looking for it, / the one light that can cast such shadows?” (23-25). The incorrigible honesty with which he desperately seeks for some tangible form through which the Lord can be perceived, prompts him in “Balance” (F) to abandon “my theories, the easier certainties / of belief” (5-6).

Many obstacles hamper the mediation of a religious sense. Many philosophers postulate the impossibility of the human brain with its limited faculties, attempting to grasp the limitless unfathomable Reality that is God. One is ever conscious of the slippery nature of the mystery of a transcendent God, which evades all attempts to be encapsulated. Prayer often seems to become a monotonous recital of meaningless litanies. A belief in God entails a belief in a particular sense of order and purpose in the affairs of mankind and one often struggles with relating evil to and understanding its place, side
by side with good. We want Him to do something about rectifying the evil in
the world. In “Adjustments” (F) he states:

Let the deaf men

be helped; . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Let the bomb

swerve. Let the raised knife of the murderer

be somehow deflected. (20-21, 24-26)

The nature of belief involves a conflict between reason and imagination,
which can only be resolved in either faith or doubt. Thus the recovery of
doubt is inevitable in one’s attempt to penetrate a genuine religious
experience. “. . . one who enters the world of contemplation must be prepared
for paradoxes. All is nothing; light is darkness; wisdom is foolishness; the
two are one; we know by unknowing . . .” (Johnston 91).

The theological quest of a proof of the existence of God can be traced
back to the Middle Ages when St. Anselm, Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus
endeavoured to establish the existence of a Prime Mover. Sceptics raised
questions, and as arguments in other areas advanced, God was relegated to the
background. Later, Descartes, in an attempt to raise an objective scaffold of
philosophical inquiry, reintroduced the concept of God. However, Hume,
using similar analytical tools, stripped the props of Christianity, stating that
religion was the product of the psychological needs of human beings.
Immanuel Kant responded to the challenge, claiming that Hume’s empirical
procedures did not take into account the comprehensive scenario, the intricate and complex relationship between reason and ethics. Thus the debate continued, and as knowledge advanced, new versions of God cropped up either repudiating or legitimising His presence. Darwin’s evolutionary theory disposed of the creationist notions of God.

Thomas’s poems confront these perplexities with unflinching honesty in a stoical pursuit of the truth. He excludes much of the ritualities associated with Christian worship and does not also bring up the matter of the “communion of saints” in his poems. However, certain aspects of Christian doctrine such as the crucifixion and the celebration of the Eucharist recur in various patterns – both conventional and unconventional – in his poetry. He analyses the creation myth in a detached manner, a characteristic feature of his intellectual approach to spirituality. His personal approach towards an anthropomorphic God, through prayer and meditation is riddled by doubts and darkness. “He does not speak as a poet who is disturbed by God’s personal intervention in his life, as Herbert does, nor is he full of wonder at God’s creation, as Hopkins is” (Gordon 243).

Thomas broods on the crucifixion, the incarnation and the pietà in many of his poems. “Song” (H’m) the simplest, most childlike evocation of the incarnation, is wrought in ambivalence, for the “sharp song” of the robin contrasts with the warmth felt earlier. “Christmas” (NBF) points at the hypocrisy of those who worship the Eucharist yet remain fundamentally
unchanged in their wilfulness. In “Lost Christmas” (YO), the manger is described as being empty. In “Epiphany” (F), Thomas claims that both the crib and the cross have been emptied by man’s efforts to make them conform to his desires. In Counterpoint, the first poem revolves around the birth of Christ, stripped of conventional patterns, and instead, vested in modern imagery. Thomas believes that the spiritual should be mediated in the physical. He disapproves of the Manichean heresy, which encourages the belief that all physical things are evil and that the infinite should be approached directly, without the mediation of matter. Hence he uses a number of metaphors in writing about man’s experience with God.

The poet has always been described as the poet of the cross. Of all the theological insights, the crucifixion has commanded a lot of attention. Thomas’s poem, “Amen” (LS) mocks the redemption myth, as a series of paradoxes distort the salvation creed. The shocking statement that “God needs his martyrdom” (18) is a reversal of the conventional Christian belief. “The Musician” (T) is a traditional rendering of the theme of crucifixion. Here Thomas parallels Kreisler’s absorbing performance to the poignant passion of Christ on the cross, bleeding, yet calm and controlled, “making such music as lives still” (18). One of Thomas’s best-known poems, “Here” (T), explores the bitter-sweet dimensions of the supreme sacrifice of Christ. Man’s destiny is linked to the passion of Christ, implying that redemptive love is almost always intricately bound to suffering. In “Pietà” (P), the cross
assumes a central pivot on which natural phenomena revolve. The poem begins with witnesses gazing at the crucified Lord and ends with the Divine Mother’s love and sorrow, which finds its reverberations in the wood of the cross that aches for the absent Christ:

And in the foreground
The tall Cross,
Sombre, untenanted,
Aches for the Body
That is back in the cradle
Of a maid’s arms. (5-10)

The last lines though deceptively simple, establish an iconography that Bellini’s The Virgin and Child and Pietà have striven to examine. The cross, which spells freedom to the Christian, is laden with a host of associated implications in “Shadows” (F) and “Mediations” (LS). In “The Prayer” (LS) the cross becomes the source of grace and the poet succeeds in appealing to the Higher Power on behalf of the bleak, human condition for a palliative to the unanswered prayers:

Deliver me from the long drought
of the mind. Let leaves
from the deciduous Cross
fall on us, washing
us clean, turning our autumn
to gold by the affluence of their fountain. (19-24)

The biblical symbols most dealt with in Thomas’s poetry include the tree, the cross and the wound in Christ’s side. The traditional association of good and evil is intertwined with the tree image in “This One” (H’m) and “Echoes” (H’m). The diabolic intention of planting the tree in the mind’s chasms evokes fear in “Amen” (LS): “The tree, / with its roots in the mind’s dark, / was divinely planted . . .” (13-15). An air of expectation envelops the crossed boughs of the tree in “The Coming” (H’m) as it waits for the expected tenant. The wound in Christ’s side becomes a major symbol in many poems like “Soliloquy” (H’m), “God’s Story” (LS), “The Hand” (LS) and “Cain” (H’m), where the image is universalised to detect the instability at the centre of existence. Variations in the wound image include the shedding of blood and the removal or replacement of bone.

The comfortable, conventional view of God is shredded into bits as the poet plunges deeper into the vortex of the infinite. The new consciousness of a corresponding rupture in poetic sensibility is visible in the new variety of poems written during this period. The challenge is fascinating and frustrating, but the poet is relentless in his pursuit. Neither dampened by bitter atheism, nor willing to succumb to a blind faith, he pursues unconventional openings. God reveals Himself in mysterious ways. The voice of God resonates at different pitches and becomes audible in many timbres in Thomas’s poems. In “There” (P) and “Amen” (P) the questions that well up in him as he
struggles to define himself as a pastor and a poet, threaten to spill out, but he resists the temptation to pass judgement. The daily grind of routine service that fails to ignite sparks in the arid minds of the parishioners is depicted in “Poste Restante” (LS) which opens with the possibility that the cross itself might grind “into dust / under men’s wheels . . .” (2-3). In “Nativity” (EA), Thomas echoes George Herbert’s image of man wielding shreds of glass, which, though reflecting our brokenness, nevertheless holds the possibility of salvation. The light of God can shine through broken pieces, thus paving the way for hope. In “Mediations” (LS), the multiple venues of mediation and the complex, many-sided faces of God appear. Thomas intellectualises Christian faith but is also painfully aware of his duty to present the Biblical message in an orthodox way. However, the failure of discursive reason and dogma to satisfy the religious need becomes the source of numerous doubts and questions. Attempting to prove the existence of God by means of something like the argument from design seems fruitless. It often does not bring one any nearer to God, and in “Perhaps” (F), he states that “the higher / one ascends, the poorer the visibility / becomes . . .” (8-10).

In “The Problem” (LS), man agonizes over the question as to whether Jesus was the son of man or the Son of God. Most expectations that God’s nature can be inferred from the way things go, seem to lead to frustration. The frustration of playing the game of life with God, who makes moves at His will for which there are no justifications, finds expression in “Play” (F). In
“The Game” (F), the poet states that “It is the play of a being / who is not serious in / his conclusions . . .” (1-3). In “The Island” (H’m), one confronts a proposal of events to be performed by God, while “The Hand” (LS) and “The Tool” (LS) examine the implications of what is beyond His control.

However, his intense longing to savour the nectar of Infinite Goodness leads him to compare the tiger to God and he concludes in “The White Tiger” (F) that “God / must be beautiful” (1-2).

Thomas’s religious poems can be broadly divided into two groups. The first group consists of the mythic poems, which examine the creation myth from different perspectives emanating from a twentieth-century sensibility. The deistic, anthropomorphized divinity of these poems exhibits diverse characteristics – cruelty and ferocity as well as compassion and empathy. This initial scrutiny of a deistic God culminates in a chase after a theistic God, who is intimate to the poet.

The second group consists of the via negativa poems. These poems examine “what is” by way of “what is not.” The poet’s intimate personal search for God is a long, hazardous and painful journey dominated by a sense of absence and silence. Like Beckett’s tramps, the poet undergoes a period of endless waiting for divine revelation battling despair and hopelessness. In his pursuit of a theistic God, Thomas’s experience is similar to the mystical experience in which the soul must pass through several dark nights in its ascent toward union with God. Sparks of hope emerge as the poet gradually
becomes aware of epiphanic moments of revelation and the shift in the spiritual journey leads to an expanded conception of the Supreme Being. Thus as Ward observes: “. . . the writing becomes not a description of God but a search for God” (98).

In many of his poems, Thomas scrutinizes the nuances inherent in the intention behind the creation of man. His broad and deep vision encompasses the knowledge that leaps forward, and leaves him with perpetually developing ideas. Old Testament stories are basically modified in some poems, and they become miniature fables of the creation myth. “The poems give the orthodox Old Testament stories, but radically altered” (Ward 92). Defying the constraints of time and space, the poet boldly juxtaposes traditional Christian symbols of service, church and God with the dark doubts and questions that assail the intellect, in an attempt to reconstruct reality. Theological and ethical facts are disintegrated, analysed and reproduced in innovative paradigms. However, scattered along with these revolutionary poems, are a few other poems which conform to the traditional rendering of the creation story, as given in the Book of Genesis. This ambivalent presentation of a benevolent and a malevolent God can be traced in the poems.

The God of pain is scrutinized early in “Pisces” (SYT), in which the joy of creation blends with sorrow that is inevitably part of it. “The Island” (H’m) distorts the creation myth by rendering the malignant intention of God:

And God said, I will build a church here
And cause this people to worship me,
And afflict them with poverty and sickness
In return for centuries of hard work
And patience. (1-5)

The confrontation of an ill-tempered creator who insists on being “Told what he wished to hear” (26), with preanimate nature, cringing from repeated blows, forms the substance of “Echoes” (H’m). In “Other” (H’m), God’s admiration for His handiwork is not without resentment:

He loved and

Hated it with a parent’s
Conceit, admiring his own
Work; resenting its
Independence. (6-10)

In “Dialogue” (LS), the poet, like Job, argues with his maker, trying to account for the existence of evil and the problem of pain. Humanity is perceived as being ill conceived, “my [God’s] waste / of breath, the casualty / of my imagination” (18-20), and in “Rough” (LS), God introduces “a handful of small germs, / sowing them in the smooth flesh” (13-14). The poet realizes in “The Mass of Christ” (NTF) that “We prey, and are preyed on” (17-18). Creation becomes the unintentional consequences of the whims and fancies of a heartless God who delights in His malicious intentions: “He stepped back; /
it was perfect, a self-regulating machine / of blood and faeces . . . (4-6). The
new reading of God in these poems is what Vimala Herman describes as that of a “Betrayer and vengeful Destroyer” (146).

Fed up with religion, and probing a different way of approaching the godhead, Thomas trespasses on the world of pure science and technology. He explores the fields of cosmology, biochemistry, genetics, physiology, technology, astrology and mathematics. In “No Answer” (H’m), he explains his new stance:

Life is too short for
Religion; it takes time
To prepare a sacrifice
For the God. Give yourself
To science that reveals
All, asking no pay
For it. Knowledge is power. (7-13)

“Experiments” (YO) demonstrates how experiments dominate the world and the multivalency of human intelligence is ploughed in search of a new consciousness. Even though his core-position is anti-science, Thomas recognizes that experimentation is a basic tool of Western rationality, and in this respect, he has been influenced by Bishop Robinson’s view that meditation can be conducted like a laboratory experiment (102).

In “Once” (H’m), the Adam and Eve story is existentially rendered with nemesis looming in the background in the guise of the Machine. A new
“God of form and number” (24) emerges in “Emerging” (LS), and “God’s Story” (LS) depicts the deity as being constantly manipulated by “the cold touch of the machine” (14). The Machine, a symbol of technology, appears in “Other” (H’m) as an agent of destruction, created by God, “singing to itself / Of money” (19-20), and becomes a “web / They were caught in, men and women” (20-21), “To be sucked empty” (23). God, who has been forced to resign Himself to the caprices of the Machine, is unable to rescue man from the whirlpool into which he is heading:

God secreted

A tear. Enough, enough,

He commanded, but the machine

Looked at him and went on singing. (24-27)

The Machine defies His command to stop its demeaning activities, and God helplessly has to look on. “The Hand” (LS), originally conceived as an instrument of construction, becomes an agent of destruction. It appears before God as a created thing and then wrestles with him for a chance to create. In “The Tool” (LS), the role of Adam is transferred to God. The tool, which was designed to alleviate human misery, instead causes a multitude of suffering. The concept of the deity that emerges through these poems is more akin to that of Zeus, than to the traditional God of Love, and creation often becomes a haphazard series of succumbing to caprices. Kevin Nichols
attempts to analyse this pessimistic outlook in the context of a Christian faith, which should result in joy:

There is in Christian spirituality, a tradition, recessive but persevering, of realism verging on pessimism. It is not a long-term pessimism.

But it sees our life on earth as one in which the forces, which weigh us down and prevent the expansion of spirit are usually dominant. Man moves towards eternal happiness and ultimately his life is enfolded in God’s unfailing love. But in this sublunary world his days are most commonly nasty, brutish and short. We find this view of reality in the Book of Ecclesiastes. It is also there in St. Augustine, in Pascal, in Kierkegaard . . . (226)

Some of the mythic poems also reflect the compassion and empathy of the traditional God of Love. The Book of Genesis describes the story of creation and in no less than seven times attests that God saw that it was good (ch. 1.4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). “Making” (H’m) is a traditional account of the creation of the world, which is filled with grass, flowers, animals and birds. The creation of man is veiled in ambivalence, for God becomes vulnerable, when he gives man a free will: “in love with it [man] / For itself, giving it freedom / To love me [God]; risking the disappointment” (15-17).
“Cain” (H’m) depicts the Lord as preparing himself for the sacrifice that He must offer in order to cleanse the world of evil. “The Coming” (H’m), written in a similar mode, presents God holding the globe in his hand and ruminating on the suffering of the people. The Son of God, moved by the plight of the people who long for an “April,” the means of resurrection, shoulders the weight of sin: “The son watched / Them – Let me go there, he said” (19-20). The crucifixion and redemption are thus explained in terms of empathy for helpless human beings. The selflessness of the deity that can be perceived in these poems reiterates the goodness of the omnipotent God, the Father who protects and guides his children. “Other” (H’m) postulates a sympathizing God, who weeps for men, when the Machine threatens to devour them.

Thomas thus broadens his approach to understanding the deity by confronting both the New Testament God of Love and the Old Testament God who demands homage and sacrifice. The comprehensive effect of this intense spiritual pursuit can be viewed “not as contradictions, but subtle modulations or counterpoints . . . as a succession of movements in a musical suite” (Morgan 161). Morgan insists that these poems should not be isolated as individual pieces that sustain a paradoxical tension, but should be viewed as “a meditation on Judaeo-Christian monotheism and its gradual movement from Old Testament to New Testament paradigms” (166).
Thomas’s personal approach to God is *via negativa*, ‘by way of what is not.’ This approach anchors itself on the belief that the ineffability and the staggering reality of an encounter with the divine can only be envisaged through a contemplative study of what He is not. A man stands at the threshold of what God is, when he clears away all his preconceived notions, associations, expectations, speculations and thoughts about God. Thus, this pathway posits the paradox of presence in absence, and is related to mystical theology. Thomas adheres to the negative theology associated with the mystical tradition of transcendential mystics like Meister Eckhart, in pursuing the elusive God.

The idea that God is in some sense the negation of the created world has had long currency in religion. It is a familiar teaching in mystical writings, both Christian and non-Christian alike. In a tradition in which the Immanent-Transcendent relation was secure, the transcendence of God was accepted as a sign of plenitude, and the use of the negative was a sign of confirmation, of an acceptance of the unity that seemed to characterize the relation of God with creatures. Thomas à Kempis, for instance, in his *Imitation of Christ*, culminates his catalogue of the glories of creation with a joyful admission of transcendence through the employment of the negative: “Above all that thou art not O my God!” Similarly, in “negative
theology,” God has been defined through the use of negative particles like Immortable, Unbounded, Immutable, and the like.

(Herman 149)

Indian philosophy is also replete with accounts of the negative, often associated with the non-dual advaita. Our concept of God is limited and can possibly be brought out by removing all traces of anthropomorphism, by claiming that it is “not this, not this.” The Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad says: “He, the Self, is ‘not this, not this.’ He is incomprehensible, for he can never be comprehended” (qtd. in Sarma 247). Swami Vivekananda posits two ways of knowing the Absolute – one positive and the other negative:

The positive is that through which the whole universe is going – that of love. If this circle of love increased indefinitely, we reach the universal love. The other is the Neti-Neti – ‘not this, not this’ – stopping every wave in the mind which tries to draw it out when at last the mind dies, as it were, and the real discloses itself. We call that super consciousness or samadhi.

(19)

Via negativa, the way of interior denial, also described as apophatic theology dates back to the fourth century when it emerged as an oppositionary response to the secularisation of the church of Christ by Emperor Constantine. Their belief that God cannot be known by his attributes as Love and Life and cannot be reached through mass worship, led
to the growth of minorist hermit traditions within Christianity. The mysticism of Asia is primarily apophatic.

The Dionysian approach to God, also affirmed the \textit{via negativa} as the right way. Pseudo-Dionysius or St. Denis, the sixth-century Syrian monk, who has profoundly influenced Christian mystical theology, has based his writings on the incomprehensibility of God. The inadequacy of human attempts to comprehend God in an affirmative way is the subject of his work \textit{Mystica Theologia}. The negative way to God is best known in the West through \textit{The Cloud of Unknowing}, a psychologically penetrating essay of practical advice, written in the second half of the fourteenth century by an anonymous author. The author, versed in the mystical writings of St. Augustine, Dionysius and Richard of St. Victor, describes how perfect union of the soul with God is possible after a deliberate detachment from everything. After the soul has trampled down its meditations on God’s works of creation and redemption and covered them in “a cloud of forgetting,” it should bring its understanding to a halt in “a cloud of unknowing,” and then wait, in patience, for God to show Himself. In his translation of this medieval treatise, Clifton Wolters, the translator describes the \textit{via negativa} in the following way:

\textit{Via negativa} starts from the unknowability of God . . . . He cannot be understood by man’s intellect . . . . When the mind faces him, who is absolutely different it ‘seizes up’; it becomes
blank before a knowledge it can never assimilate because it can never understand the first thing about it; it enters a cloud of unknowing. (15-16)

This negative way of reaching God presupposes a period of pitch darkness, when the seeker experiences a loss of anchorage:

When you first begin, you find only darkness. . . . You don’t know what this means. . . . Reconcile yourself to wait in this darkness as long as is necessary, but still go on longing after him whom you love. For if you are to feel him or to see him in this life, it must always be in this cloud, in this darkness. (68)

This period of waiting in darkness is a prelude to spiritual revelation. Our concept of God even at its best is only a feeble interpretation of a reality which overflows it at every side, a progress “from unfathomable / darkness into unfathomable light” (C, 40). The Kena Upaniṣad puts the pith of the matter in terse paradoxical language. It says: “He who does not conceive it – to him it is known. He who conceives it – he does not really know. It is not understood by those who understand it. It is really understood by those who do not understand it” (qtd. in Sarma 10).

The Bible also contains many instances of God who appears in the form of darkness. God appeared in the form of a dark cloud to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:9, 18). After Solomon completed building the temple, God descended in the form of a dense cloud and Solomon claimed that the
Lord had promised to dwell in “thick darkness” (1 Kings 8:12). This darkness that surrounds divinity partially disposes of the idea of the *deus absconditus* ‘the hidden God.’ God is there all along, only we don’t know how to locate him. The psalmist, who tries to escape from God by hiding in darkness, finds that his efforts are in vain “for darkness is as light to you” (Ps. 139:12).

Darkness becomes the means to achieve divine light, and union with God entails a purgation of the content of the self. In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St. John of the Cross provides instructions for the goal of man’s soul, which is an ascent toward God. The soul has to detach itself from the outer world, and turn completely inward, by plunging into several dark nights – “the night of the senses,” “the night of the soul” and “the night of the spirit.” The first part of such cleansing involves the sensual part of the soul, which is freed of sense appetites and desire. After crossing the night of the senses, the second stage is the night of the soul, i.e., the emptying of the spiritual part of the soul. The spirit must empty itself of intellectual understanding, memory and will in order to prepare itself to receive the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love. The soul then moves from meditation to contemplation, by ascending the divine ladder of faith, which leads to light and penetrates the innermost core of God.

The *via negativa* in Thomas’s poetry encircles the futility of his prayers in darkness to a silent God who seems to be absent. The dark night of the soul first initiated in *H’m* and expanded in *Laboratories of the Spirit*. 
begins to bear fruit in *Frequencies* and *Destinations*. In many poems, Thomas grapples with prayer in attempts to encounter God. The traditional method of praying on one’s knees is examined in “In Church” (P). The poem describes the empty church after the worshippers have departed and the lights have been put out. The power of the poem rests on the unending prayers emanating from the priest “testing his faith / on emptiness” (18-19). The young priest prays for hours, “not for food” (4), “not for warmth” (7), but “for love” (10) and he commemorates this in “Bread” (PS). In many poems including “This To Do” (P), “Within Sound of the Sea” (P), “The Answer” (F), “Adjustments” (F), “Questions” (EA), “Funeral” (BT), “The Mill” (BT), the poet expresses his desire for direction. However his questions are often met by an impenetrable silence. He is left with no I-Thou relationship, as Martin Buber puts it, and having no answers, he turns to his own consciousness and pain. In “Petition” (H’m), Thomas confesses his helplessness as an observer of tragic events – theft, murder, rape – claiming: “I have said / New prayers, or said the old / In a new way” (5-7). However, he appears to get nowhere and in “Ivan Karamazov” (LS), he bitterly compares God to a robot and states that his prayers are inevitably returned “with the words / ‘Not granted’ written upon them” (5-6). His frustration mounts, and in “At It” (F), he raves:

And I would have

things to say to this God
at the judgement, storming at him,
as Job stormed, with the eloquence
of the abused heart. (13-17)

Though new forms of prayer crop up in “Emerging” (LS): “Not as in
the old days I pray” (1), the poet inevitably falls back on the old form of
prayer in “The Prayer” (LS): “Teach me to know / what to pray for” (7-8).
His difficulty in articulating the apocalyptic possibility is mentioned in “The
Porch” (F) where he is driven to his knees, but “He had no power to pray”
(13). In “Astronauts” (YO), he states wearily: “Godhead, it / Seems, is best
left / To itself” (11-13).

God’s silence preoccupies a major part of Thomas’s search for
Some take that silence / for refusal” (1-3). “In Church” (P) describes the
silence and darkness that fills the empty church where the priest suffers a
kenosis (self-emptying) analogous to Christ emptying himself:

Often I try
To analyse the quality
Of its silences. Is this where God hides
From my searching? (1-4)

“The Hand” (LS) powerfully conveys the lonely plight of man in a world in
which God maintains His grim silence – “the eternal / silence that is the
repose of God” (33-34) mentioned in “The Gap” (F). The eeriness of residing
in this silence and darkness is movingly described in “Preference” (MHT) and “Silence” (NTF). The relation between the priest and God is rooted in silence and each has the “feeling” of “being watched / by the other” (3-4). This bond begins with the priest repeating the “worn formulae” of prayer. Gradually his words cease as he wonders: “Why does silence / suggest disapproval?” (14-15). He resigns himself to the situation, content that he is “answering / his deafness with dumbness” (19-20).

In “Correspondence” (BHN) he states that he has maintained his search for meaning, but the “truth” keeps receding beyond the horizon, and that explains his silence. In deceptively simple words, he adds: “I wish there were as simple / an explanation for the silence of God” (20-21). “Emerging” (LS) presents a resigned, firm acceptance of facts that were formerly issues of protest, in which he records how many people have often pondered on the riddle of life, “explaining your silence by / their unfitness” (14-15). The silence makes him wonder in “Senior” (BHN): “Has he his own / media of communication?” (13-14), and in “Shadows” (F) he elaborates on the effect of God’s “language / of silence” (9-10) on the human mind: “Many of us have gone / mad in the mastering / of your medium” (14-16). In “Revision” (EA), he recalls how he often plays his “recording / of his silence over / and over to myself only” (20-22). In this context, D. Z. Phillips remarks:

The poet’s frustrations have come from the fact that in asking these questions, all he has been confronted by is silence. . . .
What he is realizing slowly and with difficulty is that silence of that kind may be a precondition of faith rather than an obstacle to it. It may not be too much of an exaggeration to say that the nature of men’s religious faith may be determined by looking at their attitude to the silence which confronts human questioning of the way things are. (60)

“Nuclear” (WI) offers a new definition for the silence of God:

It is not that he can’t speak;
who created languages
but God? Nor that he won’t;
to say that is to imply
malice. It is just that
he doesn’t, or does so at times
when we are not listening, in
ways we have yet to recognise
as speech. We call him the dumb
God with an effrontery beyond
pardon. Whose silence so eloquent
as his? (1-12)

At times, the silence has a tranquillizing effect on his soul. In the lines on page 50 of Counterpoint he states his belief that a close connection with “the silence / we call God” (3-4) leads to peace, and adds that “the silence in
the mind / is when we live best” (1-2). In “Mass for Hard Times” (MHT), he
prays for “such ability to remain / silent, as is the nearest to a reflection / of
your silence” (74-76). In “Llananno” (LS), he recalls how he often resorts to
the silence in the church at Llananno, where a few moments spent with the
“serene presence” there, restores the equilibrium of his mind. One recalls the
words in the *Katha Upaniṣad* which states that: “A wise man should draw his
speech into his mind, his mind into his understanding, his understanding into
the great soul, and the great soul into the silent Self” (qtd. in Sarma 55).

An aesthetics of absence is evoked as Thomas searches for the absent
God. “He is that great void / we must enter . . .” (1-2), he claims in
“Migrants” (MHT). In “Adjustments” (F), Thomas presents his predicament:
“Never known as anything / but an absence, I dare not name him / as God” (1-
3). In “Abercuawg” (F), he states his belief that: “An absence is how we
become surer / of what we want” (17-18). Vimala Herman reiterates: “The
most consistent feature of God to appear in the poetry is his absence” (143).
Thus Thomas’s poetry is concerned with states of doubt, loss, darkness,
emptiness and abandonment – the “hole under the door,” “the gap / between
two hazels,” “the dark / silting the veins of that sick man,” “the starved folk,”
“the void of unbeing,” “the deep spaces between stars,” “bare bone of life,”
“The tall cross, / sombre, untenanted,” “lost people,” etc. The “frightening . . .
vacancy of his mind” (13) in “A Peasant” (SF) becomes an anticipation of
vital spaces in our knowledge that would haunt Thomas later in his life. In
“Synopsis” (F), he repudiates the intellectual modes of all philosophers from Plato to Kierkegaard and thus enters an infinite darkness that throbs with the possibility of a Second Coming. In “Shadows” (F), he says:

I close my eyes.

The darkness implies your presence,

the shadow of your steep mind

on my world. I shiver in it.

It is not your light that

Can blind us; it is the splendour

of your darkness. (1-7)

The *Isavasya Upaniṣad* also refers to this insight: “Those who are ever devoted to what is not knowledge enter into blinding darkness, and those who ever delight in knowledge only enter into still greater darkness, as it were” (qtd. in Sarma 32). The “darkness / of his countenance” (C, 36) becomes a reflection of the darkness that enveloped the world after the death of Christ. “History” (EA) depicts the scientist’s attempts “to turn the heart’s darkness into intellectual day” (18). Thomas’s personal encounter with the myriad of questions that throng his mind is expressed in “Questions” (EA):

The priest lies down alone

face to face with the darkness

that is the nothing from which nothing

comes. (8-11)
The Christian mystical journey begins and ends with this recognition of one’s nothingness. The utter humility confined within this “nothingness” is extolled by Thomas in his autobiography as “the only attitude for a wise man” (105). Johnston describes the concept of “nothingness” or “emptiness,” the equivalent of the Sanskrit sunyata, as the basis of the teachings of the Buddhist saint Nāgārjuna, the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu and the Jewish mysticism of the Kabbala (140-143). In “The Possession” (F), he scans the city and comes to the conclusion:

I am nothing religious. All I have is a piece
of the universal mind that reflects
infinite darkness between points of light. (9-12)

Faced with questions that are not answered, prayers that boomerang from an impenetrable wall of silence and suffering that is not alleviated, the poet is left floundering in pitch darkness. This part of the journey is described by St. John to be similar to midnight. We are without the light of our senses or reason to guide us. We are also without the light of God’s grace because we are preparing ourselves to receive it (15). Jung has also explained in Memories, Dreams, Reflections about the darkness in the human unconscious (fears, neuroses, anxieties) and the more painful archetypal darkness that lurks in the collective unconscious. He conceives this passage through darkness as
a necessary prelude to the light of individuation (378-379). In “Threshold” (BHN), he depicts his desperate, helpless gesture for help:

I emerge from the mind’s
cave into the worse darkness
outside, where things pass and
the Lord is in none of than

I am alone on the surface
of a turning planet. What
to do but, like Michelangelo’s
Adam, put my hand
out into unknown space,
hoping for the reciprocating touch? (1-4, 15-20)

His earnest longing for a reciprocating gesture prompts him to regard his frustrating experiences as a metaphysical quest which arrives at a point of insight described in “Pilgrimages” (F):

Was the pilgrimage
I made to come to my own
self, to learn that in times
like these and for one like me
God will never be plain and
out there, but dark rather and
inexplicable, as though he were in here? (34-40)

Here Thomas adheres to the mystical tradition of transcendental mystics like Meister Eckhart who conceives of the existence of an inner sanctuary within the soul, in which God resides. Thomas is also indebted to Paul Tillich’s concept of divinity as the “ground of being” and acknowledges in the 1983 radio interview, “R. S. Thomas at Seventy” that: “I do like Tillich’s idea of the Ground of Being” (178).

Thus the removal of what is physical and palpable is imperative in the mystical way, if one is to approach God. “Via Negativa” (H’m), the central poem and thematic centre of H’m, is the fullest expression of the negative knowledge. The poem posits the tantalizing “crisis of faith:”

Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. (1-8)

The poem invokes the deus absconditus, and faith expects us to believe in this hidden God. The presence of “echoes” and “footprints” suggests the possibility of a presence in absence:
His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. (8-12)

The indeterminacy that characterizes that relationship between man and God is an integral part of the development of faith. “Your mastery is to be both / outside and inside” (8-9), the poet ponders in “Neither” (NTF). “The Absence” (F) evokes the resigned, yet hopeful expectation of the medieval mystics:

It is this great absence
that is like a presence, that compels
me to address it without hope
of a reply. (1-4)

In simple words, the poet states that he feels the absence of God as the absence felt in a room just vacated or about to be entered. It posits an imminent presence. St. John states that the soul that possesses the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love moves from a cerebral engagement with God to a more completely detached union (15). Such periods of absence and darkness serve as a kind of protection against the flooding of the human soul by the magnificence of God’s Light. Milton, in Paradise Lost (III), refers
to this: “Dark with excessive bright thy skirts appear” (380). In this context Peggy Rosenthal states:

Thomas’s persistent sense of God’s absence . . . is a
metaphysical and theological insight, consistent with the vision
of major 20th-century thinkers like Karl Barth, Karl Rahner and Simone Weil. Barth’s God is wholly Other, refusing to be
domesticated as a cozy feeling or a consoling projection of our imagination. Rahner’s God exists eternally beyond the horizon of our reach, beyond the grasp of our minds and our language.
Weil’s God, having created the world as an act of self-emptying, remains absent from a creation that waits longingly for reconnection with the source of its meaning. Similarly Thomas’s God relates to humankind, but not in the comforting ways we might wish. With Barth and Weil, Thomas is wary of our propensity to cast God in the image and likeness of our desires. With Rahner, Thomas shares the postmodern awareness of the limits of human language, the consciousness that no words – not even the poet’s – can ever adequately name God. (4)

A theological question posits itself at this stage. Does an absence somewhere imply a residue of what is away? Is there a presence in an absence?
Elaine Shepherd describes the *via negativa* as “a darkness which may on occasion . . . flame with love” (186). We become conscious of an absence, only because of the tantalizing possibility of the opposite reality, i.e., a presence. Bergson conceives “nothing” as a void that indicates the space vacated by a “something.” The presence in God’s absence, an apocalyptic insight, forms the subject of many of Thomas’s poems.

In contemporary apocalyptic poetry there comes the time, at the end of a dark night, when light begins to flicker if not fully flame. This usually occurs only at the end of a considerable period of doubt and questioning, often over a fairly long period of time. Because Thomas is prolific and because he lives and works within a fully defined and active apocalyptic period, and because of his theological training and his pastoral responsibilities, the time frame for his initiation into and his movement through the traditional stages of this process has been significantly reduced. (Davis, “R. S. Thomas: Poet-Priest” 112)

There are moments when Thomas becomes conscious of a mysterious “presence illimitable / as its absence” (C, 48), the shimmering outline of a guiding force. In “The Presence” (BHN), he becomes conscious of an invisible power that occasionally catches him unawares:

Is it consciousness trying
to get through?
Am I under
regard? (16-19)

This “possibility / of your presence” (25-26) mentioned in “Cones” (EA) becomes “the still / centre, where love operates” (28-29). “In Context” (F) is a review of the futility of trying to manipulate the drama of his life for he realizes that “a power / guided my hand” (13-14) and that “It was not / I who lived, but life rather / that lived me” (24-26). In “Night Sky” (F), the poet can “pick up the signals / relayed to me from a periphery I comprehend” (19-20).

The haphazard and random transition from the dark night of the soul to a dawn of hope manifests itself in many poems. In “Groping” (F), he claims that, he is guided through darkness by “hands,” “voices” and “a strange light” (14-17). In “Suddenly” (LS), the unexpected arrival of God is “remarkable merely for the absence / of clamour” (3-4). The spiritual journey is “not into darkness / but into the luminosity of his shadow” (C, 48).

Prayers hammer through the chasm between man and God, till gentle, responding nudges are felt. In “S. K.” (NTF), Thomas compares prayer to a mirror that begins in obscurity, but gradually reveals “the reflection of a countenance / in it other than our own” (72-73). Thomas believes that the prayer of patience is always answered. The “untenanted cross” (20) in “In Church” (P), the preacher who remains on his knees, wondering whether he is “balked by silence?” (6) in “In a Country Church” (SYT) and the trap laid to capture God in “The Empty Church” (F) reflect images of doubt held in
balance by an incorrigible faith. This shift “from unfathomable / darkness
into unfathomable light” (C, 40) is perennially reversible. The secret lies in
patience and the poet claims in “Adjustments” (F):

    patiently
    we must pray, surrendering the ordering
    of the ingredients to a wisdom that
    is beyond our own. (16-19)

It is “the plain facts and natural happenings / that conceal God and reveal him
to us / little by little under the mind’s tooling” (22-24), he states in
“Emerging” (F), and adds that “for one / with patience he will happen by /
once in a while” (3-5). In “The Moon in Lleyn” (LS), though he is tempted to
conclude that “Religion is over” (18), he revises his philosophy stating that
just as the moon has its cycles, “prayer, too, / has its phases” (35-36).

Thomas’s faith throbs with life, it waxes and wanes as it buffets the ups and
downs in life. In “Tidal” (MHT), the poet explicates the life-long tug
between searching and waiting for Divine Mercy. He compares his faith to
the waves that flow to and from the shore, adding:

    Dashing
    my prayers at him will achieve
    little other than the exposure
    of the rock under his surface.
    My returns must be made
on my knees. Let despair be known
as my ebb-tide; but let prayer
have its springs, too, brimming,
disarming him; discovering somewhere
among his fissures deposits of mercy
where trust may take root and grow. (12-22)

In “The Prayer” (LS), the former agony of the unanswered prayer, “the long
drought / of the mind” (19-20) is resolved as grace emanates from the cross,
“washing / us clean” (22-23). In this context, Phillips remarks that man often
expects God to provide explanatory answers for the problems in the world.
“It is not by seeking explicit answers, but by seeing why such answers must
be hidden, died to, that the possibility of belief in a God who is present in all
things emerges” (82). There is no reason why things should go on as they do
in life. It is only when we realize this that all things that happen become acts
of grace. We often seek for justifications for things and revel in the power
that it offers us. However, it is one “who sees the giveness of his life as an act
of grace, has come to a knowledge of God” (83).

“The Flower” (LS) is an acknowledgement of the grace of God, freely
bestowed on the believer. The poet asks for “riches,” but is only given “the
earth, the sea, / the immensity / of the broad sky” (1-3). The Christian
principle of renunciation is enunciated in the poet’s realization that he must
“withdraw” from the physical world, in order to possess other riches. When
the believer retreats from the world of the palpable, the *rosa mystica* – flower of true contemplation – blooms in the soul: “The soul / grew in me, filling me / with its fragrance” (11-13). The shadowy divine presence is intimately sensed:

I gave my eyes

and my ears, and dwelt

in a soundless darkness

in the shadow

of your regard. (6-10)

The lines are reminiscent of Francis Thompson’s question in “The Hound of Heaven”: “Is my gloom, after all, / shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?” (178-179). This deep shadow caused by brilliant light is what Vaughan refers to as the “dazzling darkness” of the Lord, in his poem “The Night.” In “Destinations” (D) Thomas states that, while “Travelling towards the light’” (1), we are “waylaid by darkness” (2). In “This One” (EA) the seeker is also caught between darkness and light. However, “The Reason” (MHT) expounds his vocation as to dwell in a “mysterious / presence,” “to explore” until “somewhere far down we come / upon warmth and a heart beating” (33-34).

The search for Christian identity is the subject of “Sea-Watching” (LS), a beautiful poem that blends an ornithologist’s pursuit with the spiritual search. The ornithologist focuses his field glass on a single spot, hoping for
the glimpse of a rare bird. The spiritual seeker is also occasionally rewarded by a sudden revelation of the *deus absconditus* that flits in and out of consciousness: “It is when one is not looking, / at times one is not there / that it comes” (12-14). An eternal truth is inherent in the paradox that an absence, when experienced for a long time, imperceptibly becomes a presence:

There were days,

so beautiful the emptiness

it might have filled,

its absence

was as its presence . . . (19-23)

“Alive” (LS) is alive with the presence of God in the earth, the sea, the wind, the flowers and creatures. The mystical “dark night” is restated, as even the darkness and the silence becomes eloquent:

The darkness

is the deepening shadow

of your presence; the silence a

process in the metabolism

of the being of love. (18-22)

At the heart of Christianity is a mystery of love. *The Cloud of Unknowing* speaks of the blind stirring of love, St. John of the Cross refers to the living flame of love, and Bernard Lonergan states that one’s being “becomes being-in-love. . . . a love that radiates to everyone, friend or foe, good or evil, man
or woman . . .” (Johnston 148). “Perhaps” (F) is stringed on a series of negative paradoxes, which build up to a realization of the apocalyptic moment. The “consciousness of a presence / behind him whose breath clouding / that looking-glass proved that it was alive” (11-13) that cauterises “despair,” the willingness “to believe” and “To yield to an unfelt pressure . . .” (19), depicts the faith and hope that often perch on the mind. This excessive light of faith given to the soul is “thick darkness.” It overwhelms greater things and annihilates smaller things just as the rays of the sun obscure all other light.

“The Kingdom” (H’m) is explicit in directions about how to reach the Kingdom of God where the poor, the sick and the maimed have a place. Though it is “a long way off” (9), the Kierkegaardian leap of faith can act as a bridge to get one across:

if you will purge yourself

Of desire, and present yourself with

Your need only and the simple offering

Of your faith, green as a leaf. (11-14)

The nature of faith, according to theologians, is ambivalent in principle. It enables man to believe certain truths that are obscure, i.e., that transcend human understanding. In the 1972 BBC film made on R. S. Thomas, he states his belief that eternity is not a distant dream, something “out there,” but “. . . it is close to us, it is all around us . . .” (56). Francis Thompson’s “In No
Strange Land,” also affirms the fact that heaven is not in some distant region, but is all around us.

“Suddenly” (LP) and “The Message” (D), depict the via positiva approach. A new note of joy sounds in “Suddenly” (LP), as the poet gleefully states “Suddenly after long silence / he has become voluble” (1-2). He basks in the warmth of a promised and enduring divine protection. God addresses the poet from all sides, through water, leaves, genes, weeds, stones, instruments and even the machine itself. The faith expressed in “I have no need / to despair . . .” (18-19), challenges the widespread notion of Thomas as a poet of bleak despair. Allchin affirms that “… an inexplicable note of hope grows stronger in R. S. Thomas’s latest poetry . . .” (14). Such traces of affirmation are present throughout Thomas’s substantial oeuvre, but remain relatively isolated in the volumes written prior to the 1975 volume Laboratories of the Spirit. In “Praise” (WI), Thomas praises God for communicating with man by blending the skills and vocabulary of artist and scientist: “answering our most complex / prayers with the simplicity / of a flower” (19-21). The message from God offering friendship, delivered by a bird in “The Message” (D), leads to a significant development in the poet’s search. He begins to realize the importance of turning aside and waiting.

The search for God, according to Bishop Robinson, “cannot be done by skating across the surface of life, it can only be done by ‘waiting upon the Lord’ . . .” (101). Sam Adams believes that the test of faith is “the will to
maintain indefinitely a state of suspense” (79), what Phillips describes as being “betwixt and between” (131). “The Empty Church” (F) and “The Film of God” (F) depict the believer as waiting for God. The affirmation embodied in “Waiting” (BHN) exists in the context of insistent denial. The flower of faith that blooms after a traumatic period of waiting, supersedes rational enquiry, and becomes a symbol of grace. In “Where do we go from here?” Thomas describes the way God reveals Himself to him as “half hope, half intuition” (152). The shadowy presence of a “power” that quivers in and out of consciousness leaves the poet expectant in “The Presence” (BHN). In “Fishing” (F) the poet states: “we wait for the / withheld answer to an insoluble / problem” (12-14) and in “Gradual” (LP) he depicts his dilemma at the “borders / of the understanding” (1-2). He asks God for instructions “whether to press / onward or to draw back” (3-4).

In “R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet,” Thomas states: “God, reality whatever it is, is not going to be forced, it’s not going to be put to the question, it works in its own time. I suppose one projected this image of oneself kneeling . . . and just waiting, waiting but nothing happening” (51).

“Kneeling,” (NBF) reveals the higher level of maturity that the poet has attained. It depicts the priest kneeling before the altar, “waiting for the God / To speak” (4-5). Conscious of the prophecy of Habakkuk that insists on waiting for the vision (Hab. 2.3), aware of the psalmist’s vigil (Ps. 27.14) and reminded of the chosen ones waiting for Christ as revealed in the Epistle to
the Hebrews (Heb. 9.28), the poet comes to a profound but simple revelation at the end of the poem: “The meaning is in the waiting” (16). God has to come in his own time. “Questions” (LP) creates the perspective in which the notion of God can descend at the right time:

Prepare yourself for the message

You are prepared?

Silence.

Silence is the message.

The message is . . . Wait. (1-5)

Rosenthal reiterates “. . . waiting for the God who seemed to stay hidden is the predominant motif of Thomas’s poetic career. . . . Someone with Thomas’s depth of integrity could only have persisted if part of him truly trusted that God does, mysteriously, care” (6). The poet waits in hope and affirms in “Island” (NTF):

I would still go there

If only to await

The once-in-a-lifetime

Opening of truth’s flower. (1-4)

Thomas’s religious poems thus reflect the progress in a comprehension of the Higher Reality. Prayers to the absent God begin in dialogue, ascend to a monologue and culminate in silence, in a Kierkegaardian expectation that God will appear to him at the right time.
The truth is precisely the venture, which chooses an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite. I contemplate the order of nature in the hope of finding God, and I see omnipotence and wisdom; but I also see much else that disturbs my mind and excites anxiety. The sum of all this is an objective uncertainty . . . But the above definition of truth is an equivalent expression for faith. Without risk there is no faith . . . If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith. (Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific

182)

Thomas’s spiritual anxiety, characterized by a sense of abandonment by God, is also occasionally redeemed by moments of revelation, when he can discern what he describes in – “Geriatric” (NTF) as “a love fiercer / than we can understand” (29-30). The ambivalence generated by this uncertain period of expectation, when intense darkness occasionally blazons as dazzling brilliance, lends depth to his faith and meaning to his life.