Introduction

A poet of the unresolved tensions with which an adult sensibility has to cope, Ronald Stuart Thomas (1913-2000), the Anglo-Welsh poet voices a sensitive, imaginative awareness in lines that often move the readers to tears. The vast corpus of his poetry is a relentless inquiry into unpalatable verities, confronting uncertainties, ambiguities and the equivocal and paradoxical nature of our life experiences. His early poems, which are embedded in regional concerns, serve as a scaffold to the spirit and pave the way for the later poems where he wrestles in existential agony probing the presence of a “hidden God.” Brian Morris claims that his poetry “takes its origin from dissatisfactions, it broods and breeds in discontent, it is essentially a poetry of search” (“The Topography” 57).

Vivid insights shine out of Thomas’s poems like stars from an intensely sceptical darkness, as he makes palpable in as concrete a way as possible, the thorniest of abstractions. Opposed to the materialistic ethic of the present age, he embraces religion, Welsh nationalism and natural phenomena. Philosophical reflections on the cosmic sweep of time, on human and natural history, contemporary poets and philosophers, the process of poetic composition and the language of poetry rounds up an impressive poetic career that spans a period of more than five decades.

Welsh literature dates back to the beginning of the seventh century. Welsh poetry continued mainly as an oral practice and Welsh bards held
esteemed places in the courts of post-Roman Welsh princes and chieftains. In 1282, with the defeat of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd by Edward I, the patronage of poets passed to the houses of the richer gentry. Thus, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries witnessed a revival of Welsh poetry. The enactment of the two Acts of Union by Henry VIII, led to the anglicisation of Welsh patrons and consequently this culminated in the decline of Welsh poetry. The dearth of genuine Welsh literature continued for a few centuries.

The quickening of an interest in England’s “British” roots, led to researches in the middle of the eighteenth century. The purpose of these studies was to stimulate interest in the Welsh language and to encourage poets to use the strict metres of ancient Welsh bards. The Cymrodorion Society, established by the Welsh community in London promoted Welsh literary studies. The National Eisteddfod (a poetic assembly) was revived in the early nineteenth century. Lyrical hymns, verse dramas based on historical tales and incidents from the Bible, popular ballads employing cynghanedd (a complex system of accentuation, alliteration and internal rhyme etc.), were produced.

During the nineteenth century, there emerged a penchant for serious Welsh writing. The revival of the eisteddfod, ‘an assembly of poets,’ the activities of nonconformist preachers and the establishment of the University of Wales were factors that enhanced the literary output. Gifted writers who wrote in the Welsh language and who strove to promote the Welsh culture included William Thomas (1832-78), John Ceiriog Hughes (1832-87), T. H.

After the end of the First World War, Anglo-Welsh literature emerged as a significant body of literature. H. Idris Bell coined the term Anglo-Welsh in 1922, to refer to those writers who wrote in English about Welsh themes, from a “Welsh” point of view. Since then, disagreements, within and without Wales, regarding its precise meaning have generated considerable controversy. This ranges over the question about traditional or mainstream writers and the position of Anglo-Welsh writing – its standing as a regional, provincial, or postcolonial literature. Many writers in Wales prefer to be known as “Welsh Writers in English,” rather than as “Anglo-Welsh writers.” Raymond Garlick’s *An Introduction to Anglo-Welsh Literature* emphasises the talent of modern inter-war Anglo-Welsh writing. Anthony Conran’s *The Cost of Strangeness: Essays on the English Poets of Wales* perceives Welsh-language and Anglo-Welsh poetry to be interdependent. He argues that interaction “between the two language-groups of Wales,” is evident “on all cultural levels” (35). He detects a unifying theme in both languages – “praise poetry.” Some Welsh writers in English e.g., Caradoc Evans and Glyn Jones have spoken Welsh since birth. Others, like R. S. Thomas, Emyr Humfreys, Gillian Clarke and Christopher Meredith learned the language later. Among
writers who are not fluent in the Welsh language include Tony Curtis and Robert Minninnick. The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales provides valuable information, along with suggestions for further reading and cross-references about the literature of Wales. Its 2,825 entries are the work of 222 contributors, almost half devoted to authors or specific books.

The “first flowering” of Anglo-Welsh writers occurred in Wales in the 1930s. The short stories of Caradoc Evans, the poetry of Dylan Thomas, Idris Davies and Glyn Jones and the novels of Jack Jones and Gwyn Thomas emerged in a backdrop of political unrest and dire poverty. The establishment of the English language literary magazines – Wales, edited by Keidrych Rhys and the Welsh Review, under the leadership of Gwyn Jones – enabled the growth of a national consciousness.

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the “second flowering” of Welsh writing in English. Committed nationalists, including Antony Conran, Meic Stephens and Harri Webb were deeply concerned with the future of Wales in a world of mass communication. Among Anglo-Welsh writers were gifted men – Dylan Thomas, David Jones, R. S. Thomas, Roland Mathias, Raymond Garlick, John Tripp, John Ormond, Brenda Chamberlain, and Alun Lewis. They dealt with the complicated problems of the Anglo-Welsh attitude towards Welsh themes. Other poets included Gwyn Williams, Cyril Hodges, Douglas Phillips, Alan Perry, Tom Earley, John Stuart Williams, Robert Morgan, Herbert Williams, Dannie Abse, Alison Bielski, Sally Roberts, Peter
Gruffydd and Peter Finch. The Welsh Arts Council with its support for Welsh magazines, anthologies, recordings; the three literary magazines: The New Welsh Review, Planet and Poetry Wales, and the presence of two presses: Gomer Press and Seren Books have played a major role in promoting this branch. Writers including George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Edward Thomas, W. H. Davies, Vernon Watkins and Wilfred Owen owe much to their Welsh roots. The working of the Celtic imagination can be traced in their writings. One senses a tremendous quickening, a sense of vitality and renewal and the interest of libraries and research departments of universities in France, Germany and America seem to indicate the growing stature of Anglo-Welsh poetry.

Ronald Stuart Thomas was born in Cardiff on 29th March 1913. The only child of a merchant seaman, R. S. Thomas, after an infancy on the move in England and Wales, spent his childhood and youth in Holyhead in Anglesey. He was educated at Holyhead Grammar School in Anglesey. Thomas graduated in classics in 1935, from the University College of North Wales in Bangor. He completed his theological training at St. Michael’s College, Llandaff and was ordained as a priest of the Anglican Church in 1937. His adult life was spent serving in various parishes in and around Wales. He held curacies at Chirk (1936-40) and Hanmer (1940-42) in the Welsh marches. He was the rector of Manafon (1942-54) and later served as the vicar at St. Michael’s Eglwysfach (1954-67) and as the vicar of St.
Hywyn, Aberdaron (1967-78). In 1940, Thomas married Mildred Elsi Eldridge, an established painter, and a son, Gwydion, was born in 1945. Thomas learned to read and speak Welsh fluently to interact with the villagers he came into contact with in the early years of his ministry, but the medium of his verse was English. Having retired from priesthood of the Church in Wales in 1978, Thomas went to live at Rhiw, near Aberdaron. When his wife died in 1991, Thomas returned to Holyhead, Anglesey. In 1996, he married Elizabeth Vernon, a widowed French Canadian. On September 25th, 2000, Wales’s, some would say Britain’s, finest poet passed away.

The fluctuation in his rapport with the peasants, he first came into contact with as a parish priest, forms a significant part of his earlier poetry. The harsh life of the Welsh peasant tied to his acre of land, indifferent to the sterilizing intellectualisation of civilization, crystallized in his initial volumes: The Stones of the Field (1946) and An Acre of Land (1952). The Minister (1953), a long radio ode, is an attack on the mean and deadening Calvinism, an ever-present element in Welsh life. These volumes bred and suckled during the twelve years spent at Manafon, set the main lines of his creativity for the succeeding years. Though Thomas tried to practice a pastoral vocation with the tough farmers, who were ignorant of the refinements of church and state, he found the going hard. He realized the church’s influence was on the decline.
The move to Eglwysfach in 1954, with its conspicuous proportion of English settlers, did not alter this impression. The mild disappointment on discovering that Eglwysfach was not the Welsh Eden he thought it was, culminated in a vociferous political campaigning for Wales, both for its political independence and for the centrality of the Welsh language. This preoccupation with Wales, flanked on the one hand by his ornithological pursuits, and a new mystical concern about the nature of God on the other, finds expression in the volumes produced during this period. *Song at the Year’s Turning* (1955), his first collected volume, received the coveted Heinemann Award for Literature. Other volumes include *Poetry for Supper* (1958), *Tares* (1961), *The Bread of Truth* (1963) and *Pietà* (1966).

Cruising through the middle period of his poetic career, one feels the presence of other concerns including an interest in the art of poetry; the world of nature contaminated by technological trash and the castigation of the Welsh, who, in his view, welcomed “the English” – “every new Englishman is another nail in the coffin of Wales” (qtd. in Nightingale 9). Aided and abetted by long solitary walks in the country and the seashore, fragments from philosophy, science, theology, painting and music coalesced and filtered into the matrix of his being.

In 1967, Thomas moved to Aberdaron, on the tip of the Lleyn Peninsula. Having already received the Queen’s Gold Medal for poetry in 1964, he was further honoured in 1968 by the Welsh Arts Council with the
major Prize of Honour for his contribution to the literature of Wales. At Aberdaron, Thomas was among Welshmen who used the Welsh language everyday. He no longer felt the need to project a Welsh identity, and so he intensified and extended his quest for God and his assault on technological culture. His poetry began to transcend the immediate environment as he explored new realms of science, medicine and theology. Not That He Brought Flowers (1968), H’m (1972), Young and Old (1972), Selected Poems: 1946-68 (1973), What Is a Welshman? (1974), Laboratories of the Spirit (1975), The Way of It (1977) and Frequencies (1978) were volumes of poetry produced during this period.


In addition to the body of poetry, Thomas has written certain letters and prose articles, some of which were published in the magazine Wales. He
has edited certain anthologies, giving brief introductions, and has also given lectures, broadcasts and interviews. “Abercuawg,” his brilliant Welsh address to the National Eisteddfod in 1976 and “The Mountains” (1968), a prose piece, clearly reveal Thomas’s vision of Wales. His autobiography, *Neb* (1985), written in the Welsh language was edited and translated into English as *R. S. Thomas: Autobiographies* by Jason Walford Davies in 1997. It includes four prose articles written by Thomas – “Former Paths,” “The Creative Writer’s Suicide,” “No-one” and “A Year in Lleyn.”

Nobel Prize for Literature indicate his increasing eminence, nationally and internationally.

R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God by D. Z. Phillips deals with the precariousness of Thomas’s desire to mediate a religious sense in his poetry. Phillips’s aim is to explore the concept of a deus absconditus ‘the hidden God,’ in Thomas’s poetry. He shifts the discussion from literary fields to philosophical realms, drawing heavily on Kierkegaard and Simone Weil. John Powell Ward’s The Poetry of R. S. Thomas and Moelwyn Merchant’s R. S. Thomas, establish a critical canon on which further research on Thomas’s significant body of poetry may be based. Merchant’s study of the poet is limited to the volumes of poetry written till 1978. In each chapter, he examines the range of themes and critically evaluates the thorny contradictions evident in them. J. P. Ward divides Thomas’s poetry into five divisions, each concentrating on a particular aspect and characterised by two or three volumes of poetry. He closely examines the syntax and also focuses on the circular nuances and cadences of Thomas’s elaborate patterns. Furious Interiors: Wales, R. S. Thomas and God by Justin Wintle is an idiosyncratic study of the shadowy aspects of the poet’s life, accompanied by social observation and historical data. Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R. S. Thomas, edited by William V. Davis, Critical Writings on R. S. Thomas, edited by Sandra Anstey and The Page’s Drift: R. S. Thomas at Eighty, edited by M. Wynn Thomas are book-length collections of essays and articles on
Thomas by various contributors. They examine the poems, the poet’s concerns and subjects, his poetic technique and thereby, provide a more profound understanding of Thomas’s work. Anstey’s edition of Thomas’s Selected Prose (1983) is an invaluable collection of the poet’s prose pieces. Wynn Thomas’s collection of essays, to celebrate the poet’s eightieth birthday, spans a vast panorama of disciplines including politics, theology, aesthetics and poetics. Vendler’s discussion of the painting poems as an escape from the Welsh landscape into “the interior landscapes of the mind,” deserves mention here. Wynn Thomas’s erudite introduction reveals valuable insights. A. E. Dyson, in Yeats, Eliot and R. S. Thomas: Riding the Echo, discusses Thomas’s poetry alongside that of Yeats’s and Eliot’s. A close scrutiny of some of the important poems enables him to identify the crucial elements in them, such as the limitation of language and the intricate union of God and Christ. Stimulating insights into the themes of the poet’s elusive identity, natural environment and the expanding deity are offered by Christopher Morgan, in his book R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment and Deity.

The warp and weft of Thomas’s poetics and aesthetics reveal rich seams that are yet to be thoroughly explored. Thomas’s complex relation to the Welsh and English languages; the painting poems collected in the volumes Between Here and Now (1981) and Ingrowing Thoughts (1985); the reintegration of science and religion in his poetry; the poignant love lyrics and
the profound influence of his first wife on his work; the radical innovations of poetic technique that are apparent in the volumes written later in his life, his anxiety about language and its relation to truth and his magnificent use of the metaphor are areas that offer scope for further study. Although studies on the religiosity and Welsh concerns in Thomas’s poetry have been carried out, the ambivalent aspect in them has not been highlighted.

The primary objective of this project is to delineate the paradoxical impulses inherent in R. S. Thomas’s poetry, which reflects the bipolarity evident in personal, social and spiritual realms. Recognition of these vacillating factors and a realignment of one’s perspective towards them, can lead towards individuation. Another objective is to reiterate the perennial belief that nature can offer a panacea for the angst that pervades the world. Nature can virtually enable man to redefine himself, if only he would tune himself to her. In the wake of international interest in the marginalized and minority cultures, the study of a small nation like Wales, augments the existing knowledge about the remnants of a nation, struggling to preserve its dying culture. Thus the third objective focuses both on the necessity and the dangers inherent in the anglicisation of an ethnic culture. The last objective is to delineate how the fragmented self-concept can be reintegrated into a wholesome new reality by incorporating spiritual dimensions.

Ambivalence is built into the human psyche, which is forever striving towards individuation. Individuation refers to the process of becoming an
individual. The search for identity in all its deeper, personal, moral and historical significance entails an attempt to harmonise the heterogeneity that recurs in almost every area of human activity. This leads to a process of hybridisation, wherein a phenomenon is studied from an all-encompassing point of view. The twin faces of the same phenomenon assume importance here. The significance of something can only be grasped in its totality, if it is studied from opposite points of view. W. Moelwyn Merchant states:

Unlike Nature’s, man’s struggle is not simply for survival (however innocent that struggle may be) but for the preservation of hard-won symbols (‘trophies’) of mind and spirit which are the products of civilization.

Here, then, is a pattern of antitheses, of man and nature, of the values of the land and of the culture of cities, of innocence and urbanity, which are never resolved in the poetry. Nor can they be. It is a tension which has traversed our culture and been the source of a great deal of our art; it is no small part of R. S. Thomas’s poised craft that he renews the ancient argument with such conscious understanding of its implications and without stultifying commitment to either side. (38)

The hypothesis of this thesis is that Thomas evinces an ambivalent attitude towards Welsh themes, towards nature and towards God. This aspect of his attitude is crucial to a deeper understanding of his poetry. In his
autobiography, Thomas refers to his identity in the world as being “neither inside nor outside, but on the border between the two, a ready symbol of contemporary man” (78). The fluid and shifting impulses that emerge as the poet dives into the raw experiences of life, yield to polar opposites, from which emerges an ambivalence that becomes central in a critical analysis of his significant achievements. Though a number of studies have appeared about Thomas’s religious and nationalist poems, the ambivalent aspect embedded in them has not been explored in detail so far. As Joan Adkins states: “Thomas’s poems, . . . reflect his ambivalent attitudes toward an indifferent God, a maleficent nature, and an inscrutable mankind. On this tension rests the argument of his poetry” (248). The core chapters of this thesis, i.e., the fourth, fifth and sixth chapters respectively deal with Thomas’s ambivalent attitude towards Wales and Welsh themes, towards nature and towards God. The study is significant in that it searches the “furious interiors” of a tormented man, who draws his gift from the torment. His keen intellect and sensitive appraisal of conflicting impulses and his relentless and ruthless pursuit of truth, prevents him from being able to do away with them.

This study does not progress chronologically, but circulates thematically among Thomas’s volumes of poetry, juxtaposing the earlier with the later. An overriding consciousness of design becomes apparent when this method is adopted. Thomas’s construction of his poetic canon is invariably circular and often he returns to pick up a thread of thought for further
consideration. Poems treating the dominant themes of nature, nationalism and religion form a variety of connections. Antony Conran observes:

One of the difficulties of talking about R. S. Thomas is the way his work seems to progress in great irregular spirals: each of his books may have pieces that refer back, in style, material or attitude, over several volumes or even to the very beginnings of his poetry. It may also have poems in it which seem totally new, but which have to wait their development two or three volumes in the future. (Cost 234)

Hence, Thomas’s writings can be more profitably studied by placing them within an expanded framework – “contours” that overlap and qualify one another. Geographically, too, Thomas has completed a full circle – setting out from and returning to Holyhead. The sinuosity is explored in the present investigation, with a view to discern the lines of demarcation, and to expand these concerns.

An analytical approach has been adopted as the method of procedure. The poet’s volumes of poetry have been studied in detail with a view to isolating, the delicate, seemingly disparate elements that are grounded in the primary sources. Some poems have been analysed in detail, while others have just been mentioned in support of the argument. This approach is supported by critical commentary at relevant junctures. This thesis also incorporates cross-references to other works that have a significant bearing to the argument
being enunciated. Thomas’s words on respective perspectives have also been quoted to substantiate the validity of the argument. His works in prose, that have a bearing on matters being discussed, have also been cited. This study makes use of concepts and ideas from psychology, philosophy, sociology, post-colonial theory, deconstruction and mysticism. Jung’s concept of individuation, Kierkegaard’s traumatic voyage to the summit of faith, the problematics of language and the negative theology of the mystics are relevant in this study. The sixth edition of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers has been used as a guideline in the documentation, with minor, consistent changes.

The thesis has been divided into six chapters. The first chapter provides the groundwork for a study of R. S. Thomas’s poetry by describing the biographical and personal experiences of the poet and their bearing on the shaping of his vision. His family history, the topographical influences, the religious, social and political factors that were key elements in the formation of his persona and the major literary figures and works that can be traced in his poetry are dealt within the purview of this chapter. Several poems, both directly and obliquely reflect instances of these assorted constituents that went into the making of the poet’s mind and they have been mentioned in the chapter. Thomas’s autobiography is the main source in the development of this chapter and animating insights have also been provided by Justin Wintle’s study of the poet.
Much of the second chapter is concerned with the straddling paradox that lies at the root of existence. The word ambivalence is defined and the chapter examines its rich significance within the realms of inquiry. Reality is so complex and interrelated that it cannot be easily relegated into an “either or” framework. The search for meaning presupposes a struggle towards wholeness, which is often achieved by operating on a model of “both and” – the golden mean. The multifarious modes of ambivalence as evident in the fields of philosophy, theology, psychology and literature are briefly outlined in this chapter.

The third chapter grounds itself on some of the wellsprings in Thomas’s personality that becomes the sources of the ambivalence manifested in his poetry. The alienated self caused by the wounds inflicted on his spirit during his birth and the process of their healing; the linguistic tension of his existence between two cultures and his precarious position of being an Anglican priest of the Church in Wales ministering amongst peasants, traditionally non-conformists are some of the causes of the tensions that come into play in his poetry. This chapter also examines the complex subject of a poet’s craft and Thomas’s response to the conflicting demands that inform the vocations of a priest and a poet.

The fourth chapter focuses on his Welsh identity. Thomas’s dialectical vision of Wales and his ambivalent attitude to the Welsh peasant and to the Welsh language form the body of this chapter. His nationalistic poetry
reveals his ambiguity towards Wales: his disappointment at its constant failure to live up to its potential. His poetry vehemently opposes the cultural erosion due to the invasion, occupation and corruption of Wales and “Welshness,” by England. He would like to see Wales economically and politically independent of England. He turns towards “Welsh Wales” with its partisanship and growing sense of national consciousness as a refuge against the growing materialism and alien technology that stifles ancient traditions. Yet, he also realizes the need for a new beginning and the split in his attitude becomes evident. The instinctual life of the peasant, rooted deep in the earth is the source of the early poems of the poet. His attitude to them wavers between disgust and a grudging admiration. Thomas’s attitude to the hill farmers is “a blend of respect, exasperation and love for the Welsh hill-farmers of Montgomeryshire where he was a country rector, and similar feeling, voiced always with unmistakable intensity, for Wales itself” (Amis 56). Their way of life puzzles him. He can understand the materialistic outlook of these tough farmers who eke out a meagre existence on the bare, harsh landscape of Wales. Yet, he finds it difficult to reconcile himself to their refusal to respond to his religious ardour and to the finer graces advocated by the fine arts. Here, Thomas, like Synge and like Shakespeare in King Lear, presents human life stripped to its basic elements. However, he concedes that the tenacity evident in the peasant’s character is truly
admirable, for he has survived in unfavourable conditions. Their simple, elemental lifestyle provides ample scope for speculative thought.

Wales has been a divided country ever since the English-Welsh language fault line opened up in the late eighteenth century. Caught in the crossfire of the battle for the soul of the nation are two literatures, which are perilously close to the point of cancelling each other out. Thomas creates an art out of this resentment. He strongly advocates abolishing bilingualism and restoring Welsh in Wales. However, as he did not learn the Welsh language until he was thirty, he has to resort to writing poetry in English – the “thin” language that he vilified in lectures and broadcasts and the trauma of having to do so leaves its mark on his poetry.

The progress of Thomas’s nature poetry is encapsulated in the fifth chapter. In his introduction to the Selected Poems of Edward Thomas, Thomas states: “His taste was for solitude, the quiet observation of birds, beasts and flowers, but salted always by chance conversations with the earthly inhabitants of the country through which he passed” (12). The same may be said of R. S. Thomas’s poetry. The chapter examines the benevolent influences of the natural phenomena on the poet’s complex personality. This is juxtaposed with his awareness of the cruelty and ferocity rampant in nature – the fact that she can be “pitiless” and totally indifferent to the puny mortal. Thomas dabbles with the possibilities of beautiful pictures of nature poetry in his subject matter and the benign influence she has on him is a lifelong one.
In “A Year in Lleyn” there are marvellous descriptions of the birds, the sea, the clouds and Mother Earth. In his autobiography, he draws a graphic picture of nature: “This is nature responding to the promise of the spring, as it has done since time immemorial” (120). However, he is equally conscious of the merciless streak in her nature. Watching the plight of the peasant who strives to cultivate on the infertile ground, Thomas witnesses the indifference of nature, and realises that she can be unyielding if she chooses to be. In spite of this, Thomas upholds a vital connection between man and nature as a redeeming factor. The spiritual strength that nature can instil is also emphasized in this chapter. Thomas advocates a process of waiting for mystical revelation through natural phenomena.

The sixth chapter takes up the enigma associated with the *deus absconditus*, ‘the hidden God.’ Man is always on the verge of comprehending God, but in so much as he is a mortal being, he never will. The chapter concentrates on Thomas’s conception of God as the Ultimate Reality and goes on to delineate his pursuit of this Immanent Truth within the context of a twentieth-century sensibility. The mythical poems of Thomas, which are examined first, bestow a wider perspective on the notion of “a hidden God,” who reveals His presence in absence. The *via negativa* approach to God, that Thomas adopts postulates that God can be found in silence, solitude and darkness. This chapter also highlights the close bearing of western and eastern mystical traditions on his religious poetry.
The last chapter sums up the observations made in the previous chapters. Ambivalence is perceived to be a formative element in the poet’s vision of life. In the wake of a turbulent post-modern society, the metamorphosis from being to becoming, resolves, and yet again creates ambivalence. The process of integrating the various poles in the direction of a stable unity indicates the higher level of psychic development achieved by the poet.