Chapter 1

Emerging into the Geometry of the Adult Mind

A man’s personality is moulded from the matrix of experiences that have been garnered through his lifetime. The interaction of heredity, environment and history enables him to become the kind of person he is. A probe into the socio-cultural milieu in which he was reared and groomed and in which he lived, would provide cues to various traits of his temperament, and its manifestations in his work. This chapter builds the foundation for the study of the ambivalent element in a major poet’s body of poetry, by examining the familial, social, topographical, political, philosophical, religious and literary influences in Thomas’s life. It also examines some of his poems and prose pieces in which these impulses have been registered.

Ronald Stuart Thomas was the only child of Thomas Hubert Thomas and Margaret Thomas. Born into a family of eleven children, Hubert lost his father at an early age and was sent to sea at sixteen, to help support the family. During R. S. Thomas’s childhood and youth, his mother groomed him. His father’s career kept him away from home, and the young boy often missed him. In “Gifts” (P), he claims that his sturdy physique could be traced to the paternal heritage. However the occasional bouts of stomach-ache that troubled him were also a “gift” from his father: “From my father my strong heart, / My weak stomach” (1-2). He traces the lack of security, the pangs of
uneasiness that often accosted him to the influence of his mother: “From my mother the fears” (3).

Though Thomas was not explicit about his relationship with his family in the poems written during the early period of his career, many poems produced later explore personal relationships. Some of them reflect the deep affection he had for his father and the longing for a closer personal relationship. “Harbour” (YO) evokes memories of times spent in the harbours with the boats arriving and setting out again. While waiting for his father to return home, the young boy would keenly observe the bustling activities around him. In “Salt” (LP) Thomas glorifies his father: “The centuries were without / his like; then suddenly / he was there” (1-3). “Ap Huw’s Testament” (PS) presents his father as an enthusiastic man who was distracted from a noble mission by a girl in port (the poet’s mother). Thomas conceives of her as trapping him by means of the son she bore. “This perception of the father as being trapped by wife and mother, enveigled home and tamed, recurs in Thomas’s poetry” (Brown, “Over Seventy” 155). When his father became deaf, he had to give up dreams of becoming captain for a lesser job and return home, and this anguish later led to stomach trouble. Thomas in his teens longed for father-son conversations. When his father at last came to live with his family, his deafness proved to be a barrier. The boy was seized by guilt, which later transfigured into an antipathy towards his mother. The young boy wanted to be his father’s boy in adulthood, but it was not to be. The father
thus became the prototype of the *deus absconditus* ‘the hidden God,’ that was to haunt his later poetry.

Having been orphaned at a young age, Margaret was brought up by a relative, an Anglican priest and had been educated at an English church school. Thomas is quite frank about a certain animosity that he had towards his mother who was of a domineering nature. Margaret Thomas was a small, thin woman with a sharp tongue. Being an orphan, she felt that she had been deprived of love, and this grouse clouded her outlook on life. Mrs. Ethel Jones, a contemporary of Ronald Stuart, and daughter of a sea captain remembered Thomas’s mother. She recalled an incident that occurred when she was rehearsing in a children’s play for Christmas. The cast included Thomas, then a young boy. Suddenly the door burst open and Margaret barged in, walked up to her son and embarked on a furious tirade in front of everyone. No one knew the cause of her anger at her son and they empathized with the young boy. She added: “Nor was it the only time. We all felt sorry for the boy. That man’s had a cross to bear on his shoulder all his life” (qtd. in Wintle 114).

Being the only child, he was the centre of her attention for good and ill, and it was with a touch of relief that he escaped her clutches when he went to the University. However, in his autobiography, he recalls how his mother had been passionately weeping on the night, before his departure to the University and how his father had been trying to comfort her (36). In “Sorry” (BT), the
poet acknowledges that he was raised decently enough. It was not their “fault” he inflicted wounds on himself:

Dear parents,

I forgive you my life,

Begotten in a drab town,

The intention was good. (1-4)

It could possibly be traced to his mind’s weight. The poet seems to be pained by a common emotional trauma of male adolescence – the rejection of the mother. However, the misogynist attitude in “Ap Huw’s Testament” (PS) returns in “Welsh” (BT), “The Boy’s Tale” (BT), “Salt” (LP) and “It Hurts Him to Think” (WW). In “Ap Huw’s Testament” (PS) he claims: “My mother gave me the breast’s milk / Generously, but grew mean after. / Envying me my detached laughter” (7-9).

Later, in Thomas’s most acrid assault on his mother in the poem “It Hurts Him to Think” (WW), his mother’s milk is considered as a form of poison that serves to reinforce the rancour towards the imbibed speech of the English. Justin Wintle observes that “. . . his portraits of his mother, . . . break a widely respected taboo: a taboo not so much against a frank and intimate discussion of parental relations . . . as against revealing a level of personal animus that, however psychologically acute, only questionably has a place in literature” (100). Other commentators commend Thomas’s outspokenness
and courage in that he is honest enough to scrutinize his true feelings and
frank enough to present them as they are.

In “Album” (F), Thomas evokes the special bond between himself and
his father, the mother being introduced merely as the means of reproduction.
The uneasy suspicion that he was a wedge in their relationship lurks
throughout the poem:

There are pictures
of the two of them, no
need of a third, hand
in hand, hearts willing
to be one but not three. (6-10)

He records the dependence between his father and mother as being mutual
and depicts himself as an unwanted third, the instrument his parents use for
hurting each other. In “I” (YO), he imagines the details of his birth:

I imagine it: Two people,
A bed; I was not
There. They dreamed of me?
No, they sought themselves
In the other, you,
They breathed. I overheard
From afar. (1-7)
This pain, however leads to the probability of a panacea, for the salving of the poet’s peculiar guilt, through reconciliation with them. “Sailor’s Hospital” (NBF) commemorates his father’s death in 1965, and is indicative of his love for his father:

I turned back
To the nurses in their tugging
At him, as he drifted
Away on the current
Of his breath, further and further,
Out of hail of our love. (31-36)

Entirely different in tone is the prose passage and poem on his mother’s illness and death in The Echoes Return Slow: “The woman, who all her life had complained, came face to face with a precise ill” (76).

She came to us with her appeal
to die, and we made her live
on, not out of our affection
for her, but from a dislike
of death. (1-5)

His brutal, honest revelation that it was conscience not love, that compelled him to care for his dying mother, highlights his chill emotions, the “misshapen feelings” that connect her to him. After his father’s death, she had hoped to live with her son, but Thomas knew that it wouldn’t work out. Guilt,
anger, relief, love and sorrow, developed out of a lifetime of difficult interaction, bubble and dissolve as the poet struggles to keep them in balance. “It was not your fault” (12), he asserts in “Sorry” (BT) and yet in the highly autobiographic opening prose passage in ERS (2), Thomas uses light and dark imagery to suggest the difficulty of attaining spiritual health within the confines of his early family life. In “I” (YO) he claims: “Years went by; / I escaped, but never outgrew / The initial contagion” (29-31). Wintle reiterates, “. . . Thomas’s poetic personality is enchained and empowered by perceived and powerful childhood forces” (101). In “In Memory” (WI), the discrepancies in his complex personality surface and he says:

A child

has scarcely the right

to forgive its parents. They were not bad,

wrong only, proud as

their neighbours of the necessity

of being so. (8-13)

He claims that there is no rancour towards his parents, but a bitter affection

for the thoroughness of their scrubbing

of a boy’s body against

the contagion of the interior mind. (17-20)
Yet, in his autobiography, Thomas describes his childhood as a happy one. “And he was on the whole a happy boy. . . . It was the countryside that made him so” (31). Thomas was born in semi-anglicised Cardiff in South Wales. Being a sickly child, he spent the first few years at sea caressed by the fresh breeze. The love of the sea, a trait he inherited from his father, was one that would have a profound impact on the young mind throughout his life. When the family settled at Holyhead in North Wales, Thomas was allowed to skip school for a while, and he was free to explore the countryside. He roamed the fields, gathering flowers and mushrooms, climbed mountains, bathed in the bay nearby, and scanned the stars at night. The weather, being of prime importance in Holyhead, determined almost all his activities. His enchantment at the various manifestations of nature: the noise, odour and ferocity of the sea, the countryside that made him happy, the birds that registered themselves unconsciously in his subconscious mind, and the mountains that awed him by the majesty of their being is enumerated in his autobiography and he claims that at the end of the day, he would return home: “Having seen, having heard” (6). Nature provided him with the siblings he didn’t have, and the bond, forged in the various parishes in which he ministered, became the raw material for many poems, which will be closely examined, in the fifth chapter of this thesis.

In his autobiography, Thomas recounts the various socializing factors that shaped and influenced his life. Being shy by nature, the boy had few real
friends worth mentioning. He remembers a widow with three children, family friends living in Penrhos Feilw. Recollections of the hours spent with them brought many a tender memory to his mind. Rhodri, a young boy who became friendly with him, commemorated in the poem “Rhodri” (P), came into his life like a breath of fresh air. The bourgeois cocoon in which the boy lived was split apart as Rhodri initiated him into rough sports, cinema and girls, but Thomas’s mother disapproved of his influence on her son. Cupid lodged an arrow in his heart one fine day, when he met a girl in the neighbourhood, and the fever lasted for some months. This passion was later transferred to sports, as he began to take a keen interest in cricket and football. At Holyhead Grammar School, Derry Evans, the headmaster built a base for the fledgling poet to test his wings. Evans, who taught Latin, trained him to pick and choose words and use them skilfully, a skill that would be developed in the course of time.

Thomas frankly confesses in his autobiography, that it was his mother who encouraged him to be a candidate for the Holy Orders. She had been raised by an Anglican cleric and she felt that a priest was a respectable figure in Welsh society (35). Financial constraints were also to be taken into account, and the young boy had no objections when she suggested this to him. In an interview conducted later with Ned Thomas, Thomas claimed that it later proved to be a blessing, for the vocation gave him the time to write poems and the opportunity to read books (24). He won a Church scholarship
and enrolled in Bangor University, where his warden Glyn Simon groomed
the twenty-one candidates for the Holy Orders in discipline and provided food
for thought through his sermons.

His innate shy nature kept him away from active participation in clubs.
Nor did he get very far with girls. However, he participated in sports,
particularly rugby, and enjoyed exploring the countryside, taking long walks
and climbing the mountains nearby. His love of music, a trait inherited from
his father, blossomed as he joined the choir led by D. T. Davis, the skilled
choirmaster. In the interview conducted with Ned Thomas, Thomas stated:

I am musically uneducated, so am in the position of the man in
the street who “knows what he likes.” I graduated through
Italian opera to chamber music, especially Beethoven, Schubert,
and Mozart. I do not understand contemporary music,
technically, so tend to prefer earlier. (46)

Poems like “The Conductor” (T), “Sonata” (LP) and “Scenes” (LS) endorse
his love for music. At the end of the term, Thomas graduated without much
honour. He attributed this to his poor memory and to his fundamental wrong
attitude, i.e., his intention merely to pass the examinations. The theological
college in Llandaff proved to be a disappointment as he felt trapped in the
urban environment, and fellow ordinands were aloof. Luckily for him, he was
ordained before he passed the second part of the General Examination, and
was appointed as the curate in the parish of Chirk. Before going on to
delineate the influences exerted by the parishes in which he ministered, a
digression, in order to examine his relationship with his first wife, would be
appropriate here.

Thomas fondly endorses the loving support provided by his first wife,
in his autobiography, and in many of his poems. “Let me begin / With her of
the immaculate brow / My wife; she loves me. I know how” (4-6). This early
mention of his wife, Mildred Elsi Eldridge in his poem “Ap Huw’s
Testament” (PS), is indicative of her role as the Rock of Gibraltar in his
tempest-ridden soul. They met at Chirk. She was an established painter,
whose work had been exhibited in London galleries. Elsi was teaching art at a
school in Oswestry. Her paintings, watercolours, and drawings were sensitive
studies of the natural world. The poet was smitten. In his autobiography, he
records that her position as an artist, inspired him to prove his mettle: “She
had already exhibited her work in galleries in London, and he too yearned to
prove himself in his field” (45). The fastidious discrimination that marks his
poetry finds echoes in the strong delicacy of Elsi’s paintings. Their common
love for nature and dissatisfaction with modern society drew them closer.
They were married in 1940, thus embarking on a beautiful relationship that
was to last five decades. The deep love he bore his wife is perhaps nowhere
expressed as exquisitely as in “A Marriage” (MHT):

   We met

   under a shower
of bird-notes.

Fifty years passed,
love’s moment
in a world in
servitude to time. (1-7)

Throughout the years, Elsi appears now and then, either directly or obscurely in his poems. Her tender care for plants is recorded in “The Untamed” (BT), her home-making gift emerges in “For Instance” (P), “The Hearth” (H’m) and in “Remembering” (NTF). The quiet support she provided him and the noiseless conversations they shared are recorded in “He and She” (D) and their courage in facing life together, against the ravages of time appear in “Two” (WI). In “The Way of It” (WI), he evinces a sense of guilt:

She is at work
always, mending the garment
of our marriage, foraging
like a bird for something
for us to eat. If there are thorns
in my life, it is she who
will press her breast to them and sing. (4-10)

In “Anniversary” (T), Thomas strives to maintain equilibrium between emotion and expression as he examines his relationship with his wife and their only son, Gwydion, who finds bare mention in only a few poems like
“Song for Gwydion” (AL), “Gifts” (P) and “The Son” (LS). The dark overtones that cloud the end of “Because” (P) are prophetic of the long illness that would later leave her weak and rob her of her eyesight. “Seventieth Birthday” (BHN) painfully dwells on her lingering illness that gradually drew her away from him, and his deep concern for her emerges in “Marriage” (LS). The profound impact of his joyful marriage is revealed in his eternal sense of her loving presence in his life, even after her death, recorded in “The Morrow” (NTF). In “No Time” (NTF) he claims: “She comes / to me still, as she would” (5-6). “What we find is that the image of her is regularly updated to keep pace with the poet’s changing attitudes and preoccupations” (Wintle 147). In ERS (121), their love for each other that had matured over the ages and stood the test of time is commemorated:

Am I catalyst of her mettle that,

at my approach, her grimace of pain

turns to a smile? What it is saying is:

“Over love’s depths only the surface is wrinkled.” (5-8)

Three recollections stand out in his memory while at Llandaff. “The Musician” (T), is a warm tribute to the exquisite performance of the violinist Fritz Kreisler, who gave a concert in Cardiff, when he was a student there. He also remembers shouting himself hoarse during the rugby international in which Wales beat the All Blacks in December 1935. His journey to and fro between home and college, took him along almost the whole length of the
English-Welsh border, with the plains of England on one side and the Welsh hills on the other. Profoundly stirred, the young poet was initiated into the desire to learn more about Wales. This desire grew into a passion during the war-torn days at Chirk and Hanmer, where he served as a curate. His deep love of the Welsh countryside and his desire to be part of “Welsh Wales” were the major factors in his decision to learn the Welsh language and in the choice of the three parishes where he was to serve for more than three decades. Manafon was a parish made up of barren pastures in the central Welsh hill country, Eglwysfach was close to the sea, near the estuary of the River Dovey, while Aberdaron was at the extreme tip of the Lleyn Peninsula in the Welsh-speaking north Wales. Brian Morris claims that “His self-selected surroundings have exercised a profound and creative influence on his thought and his art, and a mild topographical meditation may be found to aid exegesis” (“The Topography” 47).

Manafon, the first parish in which he ministered, a small valley in Montgomeryshire, was about five hundred feet above sea level. There were hills around it and the farms were scattered along the slopes. There was a church, a school, a public house and a shop. The countryside was beautiful and Thomas would often climb up the hills and roam the countryside. There was a time when Manafon had been a well-endowed parish, a time when the people enthusiastically immersed themselves and took pride in their Welsh culture. More than thirty thousand people left Montgomeryshire between the
two world wars for better prospects in the cities and now no one visited these bald hills. The rector longed for the old order, as pity for the poor people welled up in him. Tension erupted as he saw the failings of his timid fellow-Welshmen who couldn’t ward off English oppression. This led to creative work and a new political element entered his poetry. The grim rural culture he was thrust into at Manafon stripped the romantic haze, an aftermath of the Yeatsian Celtic twilight. In “R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet,” transcript of John Ormond’s film for BBC television, Thomas claimed that he had been brought up in a bourgeois environment which was protected and hence:

. . . this muck and blood and hardness, the rain and the spittle and the phlegm of farm life was, of course, a shock to begin with, and one felt that this was something not quite part of the order of things. But, as one experienced it and saw how definitely part of their lives this was, sympathy grew in oneself and compassion and admiration; and since you’ve got in these communities people who’ve probably been like this over the centuries, the very fact that they endure at all – that they make a go of it at all – suggests that they have got some hard core within them. One has to face this as a priest, this sort of attack, as it were, from their side. (50)

The hardened peasants struggled day by day to eke out a meagre subsistence from the hard, unyielding earth. Religion passed over their heads
as they struggled to endure on a barren land. Peggy Rosenthal believes that Thomas, feeling alienated by his anglicised upbringing, wondered what he was doing there and writing poetry was his way of pondering these questions with unflinching honesty (4). In his autobiography, Thomas has subjected himself to self-examination regarding the wisdom in the choice of the parishes in which he ministered.

. . . R. S. asked himself many times during his career, wouldn’t it have been better if he had left the heart of the countryside in order to reap the artistic advantages available in the main centres? But he knew the answer almost before asking. If he had to choose between a magnificent cathedral and a small country church, it would be the latter he would choose every time. As far as the cathedrals were concerned, with their ostentation and their war banners, and the organ thundering fit to shatter the roof – these always smacked of the nationalism and militarism of England. For him, the English for the most part were a people who continued to dote on such things. But it was the small, plain, unassuming things that appealed to him. That was what stirred him in Manafon to write about the smallholder in his tiny fields. (72)
This prompted him to reject major cathedrals in the main centres, where he could have reaped personal benefits and artistic advantages, for the small parishes where he served all his life.

Writing seemed to be an instinctive urge for him. He would study and write poetry in the morning; walk in the afternoon and visit his flock in the evening. Walking set a rhythm for contemplation and reflection. Manafon with its “starved pastures” and gnarled farmers stirred in him ideas that would herald the Iago Prytherch poems. Amazed by the narrowness of their interests the poet was disheartened and in his autobiography, he claims that the people “were earth of the earth; their only interests were the farm, the animals, the prices, and the personal lives of their neighbours” (52). By the time Thomas left Manafon he had had enough of its crudity. The desire to secure a Welsh-speaking parish and the extreme cold winters in Manafon made him move to Eglwysfach, in Cardiganshire.

Eglwysfach was a pleasant village on the main road in rural Wales. The hilly country rose immediately behind the main road, and foaming streams ran down the narrow valleys towards the few plains between sea and mountain. The river Dovey, flowing past the village, joined the sea, and the area was well known for its birds. The local birds and the kites present there, provided a feast for the eyes, as the priest perambulated in the afternoon through the estates. His experiences at Manafon and those while roaming through Cardinganshire, enabled Thomas to form a more unified picture of
Wales, and this served as a background to his poems. The political situation in the country deteriorated, and led to his deepening concern with Welsh nationalism. This will be examined further in the fourth chapter. It was a parish of several large houses, with two landowners who divided the parish into two parts. Thomas was quick to realize that great skill was required to keep the sophisticated, anglicised, congregation from quarrelling with one another. Allusions to this occur in his autobiography (24, 27, 60 and 64), and in ERS (47), in which he describes them as “borrowing nastiness from / each other, growing harder and thinner” (7-8). The vicar hovered between them and the villagers, and the Welsh-speaking Welsh – mainly nonconformists – treading warily so as not to stir a hornet’s nest. He ponders:

There are sins rural and sins social. Does a god discriminate?

Education is the refinement of evil. The priest is required to make his way along glass-sown walls. It is easier to divide a parish than to unite it, except on Sundays. The smell of the farmyard was replaced by the smell of the decayed conscience.

(ERS 46)

He held bilingual services there, visiting the people, helping with the work of the school and attending various functions. The sophisticated congregation that faced him at Eglwysfach called for greater care in the preparation of sermons. The new milieu catered to the satisfaction of his muse in various ways. The snobbery, jealousy and greed that rocked the middle-
class communicants, the insensitive ways of the English tourists, the fierce patriotic fervour that was sweeping across the nation, the precious bird-watching expeditions abroad, in Norway, Spain and Denmark, the presence of the National Library of Wales and the University College close by, his relentless crusading for the preservation of the Welsh countryside were factors that germinated and sprouted in four volumes of poetry. Much of the poetry written during this period depicts a sense of affliction. Thomas, contemplating the situation in Wales, is faced with bleak prospects:

A part of the problem was that the military types ensconced there were used to regarding a priest as a subordinate. Thomas is ‘reminded . . . that journeying is not necessarily in the right direction.’ . . . The sources of such rancour are not hard to locate. They all reside within Thomas’s personality, poetic or otherwise. There is the frustrated patriotism, the feeling that to be Welsh is to be pulverized, that one’s territory has been irredeemably taken over, there is the man’s obvious unsociability, given vent here as unbridled misanthropy; but as well as these there is a religious intractability . . . a deep fury that the world is not as it should or could be. (Wintle 290)

During this period Thomas emerged as an idiosyncratic cultural icon. His environmental concerns branched out in various ways, as he became a member of the Kite Committee, in his involvement with the Bardsey Island
Trust societies and the Pwllhell Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament Committee and in his role in converting the Ynyshir estate to a permanent sanctuary, which was eventually purchased by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. His association and friendship with Hubert and Patricia Mappin, William Condry, Captain H. R.V. Vaughan, and later, the celebrated Keating sisters, were bonds developed in friendship and later cemented in common causes. His invaluable trip to Coto Doñana, the nature reserve in Southern Spain, famous for the numerous bird species present there, is recorded in some poems, including “No, Señor” (NBF), “Coto Doñana” (NBF) and “Burgos” (NBF). The insight mellowed and matured in the light of the growing years. He was also fond of music and art. However, he shied away from literary gatherings acknowledging his inability to speak eruditely about intellectual matters such as literature, art and philosophy. Aberdaron, the last parish in which Thomas served as a vicar from 1967 onwards, was situated in the Lleyn peninsula. Lleyn was on the route to Bardsey Island, and pilgrims frequented Aberdaron, one of the mother churches there. On fine days, the peninsula was like a long branch suspended between sea and sky. Welsh was the language used by most of the parishioners, and having found a pure part of Welsh Wales, where he could now speak the language everyday, he abandoned Welsh themes in his poetry (except for two volumes, What is a Welshman? and Welsh Airs which were published later), in search of other topics. The puffed-up, self-important type
of personality he often met at Eglwysfach, did not appeal to him as a subject for poetry and he began to search elsewhere. The challenge of scientific knowledge, the threat to the environment, language and the act of writing, the self and its relation to time and history, the problem of aging and pain, love, waiting for response from a silent God and preoccupation with the cross and prayer are the major themes dealt with in the later volumes.

Two major themes – the growth of technology and the difficulty of articulating in his poetry, a cogent response to a belief in God in an extremely agnostic age, assume importance during this period. Peggy Rosenthal reaffirms Mark Jarman’s comment in the 1998 interview from the Writer’s Chronicle that though this century has produced some magnificent Christian poetry, R. S. Thomas’s poetry is the most convincing (qtd. in Rosenthal 4).

With increasing bitterness, in images of germs, molecules, corpuscles, bacteria and viruses, he records the soul’s struggle to grasp the paradoxical presence of an absence. Poem after poem finds him kneeling, usually in empty churches, waiting for the deus absconditus. In “Waiting” (F), he addresses God from this Miltonic stance:

    leaning far out
    over an immense depth, letting
    your name go and waiting,
    somewhere between faith and doubt,
    for the echoes of its arrival. (19-23)
This concern with the mystery of God is a lifelong theme, which gathers potency towards the latter part of his poetic career. Thomas also evinced a dislike of the reductionist tendencies of applied sciences as was sometimes manifest in technology. The profit-making attitude to technology was demoralizing. Poems of anger, warning and apocalyptic vision – such as “Eschatology” (MHT) – are tempered, however, with his wry humour and glimpses of hope. The main criticism was that the machine was dehumanising and its prostitution to money power enhanced the negative impact. However, he conceded the fact that science and technology were concerned with vital areas in human development and consequently could not be distanced from poetry.

At Aberdaron, the strain of living in a Welsh area, using the language everyday, and having to write poetry in a “foreign language” was acutely felt. In summer the peninsula was full of tourists, and their ways added to his ire. The poet in the man blanched, gazing at the pre-Cambrian rocks in Braich-y-Pwll. They had been there for millions of years, and his shadow on them raised questions about his identity. It made him realize his insignificance in the mighty universe. There were changes in the Church that were also disturbing for him. Thomas continued to use the King James Bible and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Unwilling to face the reformed services and the complications that would inevitably accompany the attempts at
reunification of the denominations, Thomas chose to retire on Easter Sunday, 1978.

After his retirement in 1978, Thomas and his family moved to Sarn-y-Plas, a small cottage on an outcrop of dolerite, situated on a wooded slope above Porth Neigwl. The sound of the sea, the magnificent views of mountains from the windows, the time he could now afford and the silence that penetrated the cottage, enabled him to probe new areas in his poetry. He remained there till the death of his wife in 1991, when he moved to Llanfairynghornwy, a village inland from Carmel Head in the northwest, the most rugged part of Anglesey. In August 1996, he married a widowed Canadian and remained there till his death in September 2000. His personal pilgrimage had covered a full circle – tracing an experiential and geographical parabola, carving out from Holyhead in Anglesey, to and out of the borders of Wales (Chirk and Hanmer) before arching back, via Manafon and Eglwysfach, to Aberdaron, and finally back to Anglesey.

Thomas’s political awakening had been slow in its gestation. He had refrained from joining the learned societies of the college, partly due to his innate shy nature and partly due to his inability to participate in the intellectual discussions held there. The world of nature held a greater attraction for him. While he was a curate at Chirk, he started to build a library and his association with the local branch of Toc H, led to an intellectual awakening. Toc H was a gathering pledged to service and Christian
fellowship founded during the First World War. Thomas often had to address the gathering there and participate in discussions with middle-class experienced men, who had spent time abroad. The debates, the references to situations in other countries, stimulated his political interests, and he started writing articles and building a library.

As the situation in Europe worsened, the curate got a chance to read a booklet by Hewlett Johnson, Dean of Canterbury in which he had stated his views about the role of the capitalists in the existing condition of Europe. He preached about the subject in the parish church but was later dissuaded by the vicar. His pacifist and conscientious objection to war thus received a rude setback with the realization that the church was not willing to condemn war, but only to “pray” for the men, prompting them at the same time to do their duty.

Then came the Munich crisis. As discussions between Hitler and Chamberlain continued, the country began to prepare for war. The curate recalled the war-torn days in his autobiography and the endless activities associated with it – the gas masks, rationing of food and petrol, etc. (48). The war drew out a degree of nationalism among the youth in Wales, and the thrust was on a greater degree of “Welshness.” Thomas, now a rector at Hanmer, was newly christened in Welsh social and political problems. He was fallow ground for new ideas. An article in the newspaper Y Faner by Saunders Lewis, which finished with the words, “O, flodyn y dyffryn, deffro” ‘Oh, flower of the valley, awake,’ ignited him to visit Lewis. Lewis received
him kindly and advised him to use the Welsh language and to inspire the people through his writings.

Saunders Lewis, Welsh poet, dramatist and critic created a major impact on the political-nationalist identity of modern Wales during the twentieth century. He put Welsh nationalism on the world map in 1936, when along with two other party stalwarts, D. J. Williams and Rev. Lewis Valentine, he set fire to some empty huts and a stack of wood at the site of a proposed RAF bombing school at Pen-y-berth on the Lleyn Peninsula. Soon afterwards, they surrendered themselves, were arrested and imprisoned. The frustration of the small, peace-loving Wales was now a topic of international interest, and overnight, Lewis became a legend. Thomas eulogises him as a small man with a big heart and has paid tribute to the revolutionary influence Lewis had on him in “The Patriot” (BT) and “Saunders Lewis” (WA). In “The Patriot” (BT), Thomas claims, “He had that rare gift that what he said, / Even the simplest statement, could inflame / The mind and heart of the hearer” (1-3).

Saunders Lewis, in his Welsh language play *Buchedd Garmon*, presents one of his characters, as depicting Wales as a precious vineyard placed in his care, to be bequeathed to the future generation, but which is now being destroyed by invaders. Many of the poems of R. S. Thomas can be understood in this context.
Indeed the relationship between the work of Saunders Lewis and of R. S. Thomas is especially significant. For each of them history is a living thing, stirring in the blood; for each, language is the communication of a tradition not confined to Wales but European-wide and millennia-long; neither has sought power or place; for each, poetry has expressed the same prophetic union of compassion with a cleansing anger. (Merchant 50)

He sees with clarity, sometimes with despair, the gap between the servile reality of the contemporary situation and the glorious past, the cultural decay, the contrast between the depopulated Welsh uplands and the rich English lowlands and the split in the Welshman’s soul with regard to the Welsh language. This bitterness first affects his relationship with the peasant folk and later spreads out to engulf modern man. The overflow of serious Welsh writing with nationalist leanings, partly due to the revival of the eisteddfod ‘an assembly of poets,’ contributed in promoting the Welsh culture. Thomas’s political literary articles: “The Depopulation of the Welsh Hill Country,” “Replies to Wales Questionnaire 1946” and “Some Contemporary Scottish Writing,” published by Rhys in Wales were indicative of his acute insight into the social and political problems besetting Wales. Two other articles, which appeared in the Welsh-language literary magazine Y Fflam, ‘The Flame,’ were important. “Llenyddiaeth Eingl-Gymreig,” ‘Anglo-Welsh Literature’ explored the nuances inherent in the term “Anglo-Welsh,” and “Dau Gapel,”
'Two Chapels’ is a platform to ruminate on nonconformity within the Welsh fabric. Thomas also often expressed his misgivings about the guidance given by the church in the background of war. He expressed his views in *Y Llan*, the Church in Wales’s Welsh-language weekly. He supported the *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* ‘Welsh Language Society’ and voiced his opinions on behalf of the Welsh-cause in public arenas.

His association with leaders and supporters of *Plaid Cymru* ‘Welsh National Party’ included Saunders Lewis, Islwyn Ffowc Elis (a Calvinistic Methodist minister, Welsh novelist and prose writer), Euros Bowen (poet and Anglican priest-editor of the magazine *Y Fflam*), D. J. Williams (celebrated prose writer – one of “the famous three” associated with the “fire at Lleyn”), Keidrych Rhys (poet and editor of the periodical *Wales*) and Gwynfor (politician and historian, President of *Plaid Cymru* from 1945 to 1981 and that party’s first Member of Parliament). In his autobiography, he recalls his meeting with Islwyn Ffowc Elis at Llanfai, where they discussed matters of common interest (54). He wrote to Euros Bowen for help with the Welsh language, and was invited to stay in Llangywair for a week. They burnt the midnight oil discussing the political scenario, especially the problem of the choice between the Welsh and English language. One incident of particular interest to him was the secret plans laid down by some of the loyalists to go to Trawsfynydd to block the roads in order to prevent the army from extending its camp there. It was a momentous event for the poet who participated in the
protest, for the famous D. J. Williams was to be there. The day proceeded eventless, with Gwynfor and Waldo giving appropriate directions and the next day the papers were full of news about the bold action taken (55). Invited by Douglas Young, a Scottish nationalist, he visited various societies in Scotland to talk about Wales. He also attended the first post-war meeting of the Celtic Congress in Bangor.

During the sixties, when the political situation worsened, Thomas emerged as a politically active figure and created ripples by his uncompromising statements. According to the advice given by Saunders Lewis earlier, he tried to influence others by his patriotic verses. All through his life, Thomas has responded to particular events and processes in the social and political life of Wales in his poetry, such as the drowning of valleys in “Reservoirs” (NBF), the flattening of a previously inhabited countryside in “Afforestation” (WA) and the investiture of the Prince of Wales in 1969 in “Loyalties” (NBF). His refusal to condemn the controversial activities of the Meibion Glyndwr ‘Sons of Glyndwr,’ seemed contradictory to his earlier description of himself as a Christian pacifist and earned him mixed reactions from the public. In the interview with Ned Thomas, when questioned about this, Thomas replied that his remarks had been misunderstood. He claimed that he admired their courage and was glad that the Welsh spirit was not completely subdued (33). Thus Thomas maintained an active interest in politics during the heyday of his life, till other interests took over.
Thomas’s religious views have been particularly influenced by Bishop Robinson’s *Honest to God*; by Paul Tillich’s *The Shaking of the Foundations* and by the tenets proposed by Kierkegaard. Traces of the influence of Plato, Spinoza, Bishop Berkeley, Nietzsche, Kant and Wittgenstein can also be discerned in his poems. Thomas shares with the mystical poets, like Eckhart, a belief in “the soul’s good form” (qtd. in Adkins 249). He believes in the existence of an inner niche that man can return to, in order to propitiate a rational understanding of himself.

William Blake and George Herbert have also influenced Thomas’s poetic faculty, particularly in the religious poems. Like Blake, Thomas often locates heaven and hell in the same place in poems like “The Small Window” (NBF). Thomas’s “The Porch” (F) is indebted to Herbert’s “The Church Porch.” In the introduction to his selection of Herbert’s poetry, Thomas states that Herbert had an argument, neither with others, nor with himself, but with God (12), and in doing so defines his (Thomas’s) own dominant theme in the volumes of poetry written later in his life. Both Thomas and Herbert have Welsh connections, but write in English. Both share a love of nature and music. The idea of the *deus absconditus* is a recurrent theme and the cross is a central image in their poetry.

The views of the Danish Christian existentialist thinker, Søren Kierkegaard left an imprint on the young priest. Kierkegaard influenced Thomas to turn inward, into his soul. Thomas’s prose and poems contain
references to the murky waters of doubt that, according to Kierkegaard, necessitates the “leap of faith.” In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard describes the existential effect of this leap and the consequences that justifies the leap. Thomas, in his poem “Fugue for Ann Griffiths” (WA) and “He and She” (D) alludes to Kierkegaard’s metaphor of the “70,000 fathoms” over which the soul dangles precariously, as it journeys from doubt to faith. In “Kierkegaard” (D) Thomas refers to Kierkegaard being deeply wounded by a hostile press, and like Thomas “experimenting” with his “amen.” Thomas claims in “A Grave Unvisited” (NBF), that though he visited Denmark, he had “deliberately” not visited Kierkegaard’s grave in Copenhagen. He believes that it is much more important to “go / Up and down with him in his books, / Hand in hand like a child” (25-27). In “I” (MHT), he acknowledges the importance of the light of knowledge that Kierkegaard had hinted about, which springs from individual religious isolation. “S. K.” (NTF) pays a unique tribute to the philosopher claiming that “no apparent / lunatic was ever more sane” (25-26). Wintle claims that “Outside the scriptures, the figure R. S. Thomas most consistently identifies with . . . is Søren Kierkegaard . . .” (417). In “The Creative Writer’s Suicide,” Thomas uses Kierkegaard’s The Present Age as the “springboard” for his address. The “simple offering / of your faith, green as a leaf” (14) from Thomas’s poem “The Kingdom” (H’m) posts, in a quiet way, Kierkegaard’s leap of faith.
Bishop John A. T. Robinson’s *Honest to God* (1963) created a deep impact on Thomas. In his autobiography, Thomas comments that though the church has produced a number of thinkers including Paul, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Pascal, our image of God has to be transformed, according to the proposal put forward by Bishop Robinson (107). The change that Robinson advocates is from an “impersonal” to a “personal” God, from a “deistic” to a “theistic” concept of divinity. Referring to the deistic concept, Robinson claims that: “Here God is the supreme Being, the grand Architect, who exists somewhere out beyond the world and generally gives evidence of his benevolent interest in it” (30). He contrasts this far-off God to the theistic concept of divinity stating: “Theism . . . understands by this a supreme person, a self-existent subject of infinite goodness and power, who enters into a relationship with us comparable with that of one human personality with another” (48). Thomas’s mythic poems explore the “deistic” concept of divinity, while the *via negativa* poems are concerned with the mediation of a personal God in the late twentieth century, taking into account the discoveries and changes that have influenced human intelligence. Bishop Robinson also conceives of a topographical shift in the theological vision from a God “out there” to a God “in here.” By this, he negates the concept of a God occupying a distant Elysium, and instead perceives that God as pervading the created world, as filling the soul of human being. He explains this by referring to the depth of reality that one reaches at the centre of life and adds that Kierkegaard
explains it as a “deeper immersion in existence” (47). This God is everywhere and nowhere, and He can be discovered by “turning aside.” This concept of a *deus absconditus* becomes a key theme in Thomas’s poetry.

Paul Tillich’s concept of the transitoriness of life can be discerned in Thomas’s belief in the flash of divine inspiration. Tillich stresses on the intricate union of natural and spiritual powers in the chapter “‘Nature, Also, Mourns for a Lost Good,’” (*The Shaking* 82-92). Thomas has reaffirmed this viewpoint in his nature poetry. The concept of “waiting” proposed by Tillich (*The Shaking* 151-154), have found recurrent mention in Thomas’s written words and statements.

Many other poets have been instruments in the development of Thomas’s poetic faculty. In this context J. P. Ward remarks:

R. S. Thomas absorbed his influences and covered his tracks with great skill, yet his critics have begun to identify quite a lot in recent years, in the Welsh tradition as much as the English, and will no doubt continue to do so. However, the pattern of main sources from mainstream English literature and traditional philosophy has been fairly constant even while emphases have fluctuated within that. There is the obvious background of the Bible, Plato, Shakespeare, the Anglican liturgy and the canon of Welsh history and literature. I continue to feel that Herbert, Milton, Yeats, Eliot and Stevens are the most important poets,
and among the philosophers Kant, Coleridge, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Bergson; Wittgenstein joins the latter list in the later collections. Wordsworth too, of course, is an enormous influence, both as to his poetry and in his feeling for nature. Yet Wordsworth’s way of taking nature into himself as his own meditation leaves it a little different from Thomas’s nature, where item after item becomes symbolic, if not sacramental. (9)

The influence could be traced back to his school days when Wordsworth’s poems and Coleridge’s theory of the imagination were imprinted in the young mind. His debt to Romanticism is explicitly explained in his introduction to The Penguin Book of Religious Verse. He believed that the world needed the unifying power of the imagination, and this was best provided by poetry and religion (9). However, in practice, his poetry has been marked by distrust in imagination as much as by an attraction towards the glorious possibilities it held out. He had grave misgivings about the power of imagination to conjure up an artificial and autonomous world that was at odds with the real world. Thomas felt that the lure of the imagination in discovering a new meaning in life was an illusory one. The mirage would fade in the course of time, and one would be left to confront bewildering reality. “Thomas’s later poetry has made this distrust of the imagination into a central theme, while at the same time allowing itself considerable speculative scope” (Vicary 94). In “Coleridge” (SYT), Coleridge’s theory is
later viewed as a “vain philosophy” in its assumption of the superiority of mental activities that fail to take into account practical realities:

He felt his theories break and go
In small clouds about the sky,
Whose nihilistic blue repelled
The vain probing of his eye. (12-15)

Thomas’s earliest poems were tender, delicate lyrics, full of references to the countryside, similar to the poems of nature poets like Robert Frost, Edward Thomas, Tennyson and the Georgian poets. The first stirrings of the poet found expression in doggerels written in his boyhood and minor poems published in the college magazine. Immersed in Palgrave’s Golden Treasury, the young poet wrote enthusiastically, producing limp, conventional, sentimental stanzas. Later, in order to equip himself better for his responsibilities as a priest, Thomas began to purchase books. He read the works of Wordsworth, Tennyson and Edward Thomas, and found explicit the love of nature he had indulged in as a child.

While studying at school, Tennyson became his favourite poet and having won a prize in which he could choose a book, he asked for a biography of Tennyson. The boy wallowed in descriptions of the countryside especially those in “The Lady of Shalott” and the impressions gathered were later evident in poems like “Ninetieth Birthday” (T), The Minister and “Burgos” (NBF). Later, Edward Thomas, who, though urban born, had chosen to live in
a rural environment, became his model. In his autobiography, he declared that Edward Thomas was one of his favourite poets and was a decisive factor in his resolution to write about the countryside (45). Thomas has edited a book of verse, written by Edward Thomas, and in the introduction he states: “His is a minor voice for what that word is worth, but one of integrity and individuality” (13). Frost’s influence is vivid in the terse, clear, solid and unillusioned presentation that characterizes many of Thomas’s poems. Runcie claims that like Frost, Thomas is the poet of the countryside, and his countryside is Welsh (56). However, his farmers, unlike Frost’s, are not philosophers.

Thomas approved of Arnold’s testimony to the value of Celtic literature. The influence of Arnold is evident in many poems by Thomas in The Bread of Truth. In “Song” (BT), Thomas acknowledges his paucity claiming that “I am poor / I have nothing to give / That is not myself” (1-3). Yet, he asserts that he is “alive” and has “no fear,” thus is able to speak “the language / Of sweetness and light” (16-17). Ward believes that there is “... an explicit reference to Arnold at the end of ‘Song’ and a clear echo at the end of ‘The Survivors,’ which immediately follows” (66). He adds that other echoes of the short, regular line found in many of Arnold’s poems occur in “So” (BT), “Movement” (BT), “Welcome” (BT), and “Tramp” (BT). In “Words and the Poet,” Thomas refers to a prominent characteristic of his work: “There is always lurking at the back of my poetry a kind of moralistic
or propagandist intention . . .” (qtd. in Merchant 24). Here, he places himself in the line of Arnold, giving prime importance to social and political commitments.

Acknowledged Welsh-language poets and writers including David James Jones (Gwenallt), Waldo Williams, Anerin Talfan, T. H. Parry-Williams, Sir Albert Evans-Jones (Cynan), and Kate Roberts also left an impression on the poet. Gwenallt is eulogized by Thomas in “A Lecturer” (BT):

Watch him,
As with short steps he goes.
Not dangerous?
He has been in gaol. (16-19)

Basically concerned with the relationship between social justice and Christian faith, Gwenallt inspired Thomas to depict his views on social problems in his poetry. In his autobiography, Thomas recalls his revolutionary fervour, promoted by Waldo Williams, one of the organizers of a protest that Thomas took part in (55). Parry-Williams, influential in modernizing the idiom of Welsh poetry in the twentieth century, shared with Thomas an obsession with the lonely self. The essay “Allusions to Welsh Literature in the Writing of R. S. Thomas,” by Jason Walford Davies enumerates Thomas’s debt to Welsh-language writing and shows that Thomas has a detailed knowledge of Welsh history. In his poems he has alluded to it at nearly every stage of its
development. Many lines and passages in Thomas’s poems can be traced to the Welsh originals. M. Wynn Thomas in his introduction to *The Page’s Drift: R. S. Thomas at Eighty* states:

Several of the main aspects and concerns of Welsh-language literature during this century are translated into powerful English in Thomas’s poetry. Indeed, his whole concept of poetry has been strongly marked by the tradition of politically engaged writing that has been a feature of twentieth-century literature in Welsh. Whereas outsiders tend to regard Thomas simply as a loner, there is a very important sense in which he belongs to a whole body of writers in Wales whose talents have been committed to the preservation of an increasingly threatened culture. (16)

The Scottish and Irish literary Renaissance created waves that spread far and wide. Fiona Macleod (pen name of William Sharp, Scottish novelist, poet and critic) was another dominant influence. The poet was under the spell of the Hebrides, of which Macleod wrote in his Celtic romantic works including *Pharais*, *The Mountain Lovers*, *Green Fire* and *The Winged Destiny*. The romantic haze woven in the early works of Yeats, Hugh MacDiarmid (Scottish poet) and Macleod stirred the poet so much that he undertook trips to Scotland and Ireland. Under the influence of Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger* (1942), Thomas turned from merely
descriptive verse like “Cyclamen” (SF) and found both subject and theme in his native Wales. The experiences of Kavanagh’s peasant farmer, Maguire, reverberated in those of Thomas’s peasant farmer, Iago Prytherch.

In many poems, interviews and memoirs, Thomas has repeatedly acknowledged Yeats as an early and continuing model. Thomas’s attention to self and spirit in “Pavane” (H’m) echoes the Yeatsian dilemma, “the quarrel with the soul.” In “The Moon in Lleyn” (LS), written during the later years of his ministry, Thomas meditates on a global change that is imminent. Referring to Yeats’s belief in a new pattern that emerges after two thousand years, Thomas reaffirms that “Yeats was right” (10). “The Dance” (P) is as savage in its intention as some of Yeats’s last poems. The poet’s fascination for the extravagant, evident in the early poetry of Yeats, and reflected in poems like “An Old Woman” (AL) and “The Village” (SYT), is mellowed in the course of time, and the inclination towards an admirable colloquial directness is felt in poems written later. Wintle reiterates: “Thomas’s verse would certainly have been vastly different had the literary encounters with Edward Thomas or Yeats never occurred” (142). In “Waiting” (BHN) he claims that his assessment of the poet has undergone a change in the course of time:

Yeats said that. Young
I delighted in it:
there was time enough.
Fingers burned, heart

Scared, a bad taste

in the mouth, I read him

again, but without trust

any more. (1-8)

However, the continuing preoccupation with the poems and the philosophy of Yeats is evident in ERS, in which Thomas records his memories. Referring to the solitude that Yeats sought for all his life, Thomas claims that he enjoys a similar, blessed state of peacefulness in the “coastal solitude” of the Lleyn peninsula (ERS 118).

New, powerful influences set to work as Thomas was initiated in the poetry of Hopkins, Owen, Stevens, Larkin, Williams, Hill, Pound and Eliot. Thomas shows a kind of tolerant compassion in poems like “The Fisherman” (NBF), “Death of a Peasant” (AL) and “Evans” (PS) that parallels sentiments in some of Hopkins’s poems.

A major influence in Thomas’s formation was that of Wallace Stevens. A perceptive, fearless and critical examination of this major poet is attempted in “Wallace Stevens” (BT) in which the bitter source of the poet’s power is attributed to a shift in his perspective: “Yet painfully on the poem’s crutch / He limped on, taking despair / As a new antidote for love” (28-30). Thomas’s “Thirteen Blackbirds look at a Man” (LP) is indebted to Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of looking at a Blackbird.” In “Nocturne by Ben
Shahn” (H’m) Thomas places lines in length, which are equally weighted, similar to the style of some of Stevens’s poems. Thomas eulogises Stevens describing him as a “word-wizard” and a “trapeze artist of the language” (17) in “Homage to Wallace Stevens” (NTF), acknowledging that he often turned to him for encouragement: “I turn now / not to the Bible / but to Wallace Stevens” (1-3). In a private conversation with M. Wynn Thomas, R. S. Thomas revealed that he had been reading poems by Wallace Stevens every day, for the past thirty years (qtd. in M. W. Thomas, Introduction 12).

The existential aridity in the poems of Eliot finds echoes in Thomas’s “Border Blues” (PS) and “Song at the Year’s Turning” (SYT). Both poems, written in a fit of disenchantment, reveal hints of the Eliotic references to decay, dust, rotten material and purgatorial flames. The spiritual vacuum, the intellectual and technological explosion that marked the twenty-first century, is explored through abstract concepts and scientific imagery in poems like “Experiments” (YO), “The Cast” (EA), “Raptor” (NTF) and “Publicity Inc.” (LP). The poem on page 29 of ERS focuses on the land ravaged by the infiltration of technology. “Like T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Wasteland’, this truly is a poem about the spiritual death brought about by modern civilization . . .” (Castay 138). Thomas’s use of the “narrator” and other “voices” in The Minister can also be traced to the early dramatic work of Eliot, particularly Murder in the Cathedral.
The world in H’m, Frequencies and Laboratories of the Spirit is a post-holocaustic world reminiscent of Edwin Muir’s in “The Horses.” Thomas’s evocation of the machine in poems like “Digest” (H’m), “The Gap” (LS), “Directions” (BHN) and “Adam Tempted” (MHT) as a destructive agent, is comparable to Ted Hughes’s Crow universe – a civilization ravaged by technological innovations and corroded by modern material culture.

Thomas’s “Sorry” (BT) echoes sentiments expressed by Larkin in “Home Is So Sad.” Watkins and Thomas also share similar concerns – exploring the relation between time and eternity, probing spirituality in a secular cosmos and exposing themselves to absorption of metaphysical inputs.

William Carlos Williams was influential in the change of form evident in certain poems in the volumes written by Thomas later in his life, when he experimented with stepped, indented lines and broke syntax radically across lines. In LS, he drops the conventional capital letter at the beginning of the line. The setting of Counterpoint is based on the biblical structure of reality . . . B.C. . . . Incarnation . . . Crucifixion . . . A.D. In Mass for Hard Times, he experiments with some of the classic structures of modern consciousness – the form of the Mass and liturgy, children’s rhymes, the seasons and the sonata. This change seemed more suitable in keeping pace with modern currents of thought and subject matter. Rhyme, which had been used earlier, was later dropped. In ERS, short prose passages are juxtaposed with free verse. In the interview with Ned Thomas, Thomas has acknowledged his debt
to Geoffrey Hill’s Mercian Hymns and Coleridge’s “The Ancient Mariner” in the production of this volume (44). In “The Making of a Poem,” Thomas, when questioned about the dominant influences in his work, stated:

A poet has to learn his craft from the study of all other people who have written. People write to me, and say, ‘Who is it that has influenced you?’ and I always say, ‘This is a question I don’t answer because it is up to everyone else to find out what influences are visible in one’s writing,’ but I always add that I am in debt to every other poet who has ever written and whom I have ever read. (82)

He also voiced his doubt as to whether poetry of top rank had ever been written in accordance with a theory (81-82). Accordingly, a follower of no particular movement as such, Thomas attempted to set down his experiences of life in verse. The creative output of Thomas is thus a dynamic corpus informed by an expansive receptivity to a variety of influences, of which the present chapter presents a selective sampling. He had lived long and seen much. He had witnessed the waxing and waning of fashions, the ennui and angst following the world wars and the revolutionary effects of the discoveries and theories of the scientists. That all this was part of Him, who was the prime mover, posed the question of reconciliation and led him to conclude that the only answer to all this was humility. Living in an ancient cottage and brooding on the knowledge that the threat of the machine and the
nuclear bomb was imminent and yet, often experiencing exhilarating
moments in nature in touch with existence, pure and simple, Thomas
produced poetry of troubled power, the value of which has not yet been fully
recognized. The subsequent chapters will attempt to address these
imperatives.