2 ‘No-one with a crown of light’

Introduction

In his autobiography, No-one (1985), R. S. Thomas recounts his reaction to the sight of his shadow falling on the pre-Cambrian rocks at Braich y Pwll on the Llŷn peninsula:

On seeing his shadow fall on such ancient rocks, he had to question himself in a different context and ask the same old question as before, ‘Who am I?’, and the answer now came more emphatically than ever before, ‘No-one.’

But a no-one with a crown of light about his head. He would remember a verse from Pindar: ‘Man is a dream about a shadow. But when some splendour falls upon him from God, a glory comes to him and his life is sweet.’ (78)

The quotation briefly highlights, in a three-part progression, the project of the self which, for R. S. Thomas, is integral to the project of poetry. In its first phase the experience raises the recurring question of identity for the poet: ‘Who am I?’ Immediately following that question, in phase two of the progression, comes the equally emphatic and recurring answer to the question: ‘No-one’. Phase three begins the new paragraph and qualifies the original answer, expanding its single dimension into a wider paradox. A no-one with a crown of light about his head is clearly not merely someone, but someone of importance, a glorified someone, a saint or a god. The quotation, from Pindar’s eighth Pythian Ode, which forms the latter half of phase three, brings the experience back to its origins in shadow and at the same time restates the entire progression: “‘Man is a dream about a shadow. But when some splendour falls upon him from God, a glory comes to him and his life is sweet.’” Thomas’s answer to the question ‘who am I?’ has two parts: I am no-one; I am someone. Pindar’s answer echoes the poet’s, but with one significant difference: man is a dream about a shadow, and yet in the favour of God he becomes something more, something characterised by glory and sweetness. Pindar’s transformation of man from dream and shadow to glory and sweetness is directly contingent upon the splendour falling from
God. Thomas’s no-one and someone are, by contrast, simultaneous realities apparently independent of any such contingency. It is important to isolate and retain this discrepancy without attempting to resolve it down into a unity. Much of Thomas’s poetry can be seen as flowing out of the single recurring question ‘who am I?’ The poems which spring from that root are sometimes characterised by the paradoxical answer of no-one and someone, and at other times characterised by the answer of no-one who becomes someone through a recognition of divine grace. In the first case the conjunction is important. Thomas is not claiming to be no-one or someone, but rather these things together, no-one and someone. The poet is not charting fluctuations between options which occur across time, but investigating how the emotional experience of being no-one and someone can coexist, how the insubstantiality of the dream and shadow he feels himself to be can partake equally of the characteristics of glory and sweetness which he also feels himself to be. Ultimately this becomes an investigation into the pain of non-being and the pleasure of actual being. It is his repeated attempts to reconcile this no-one and this glorified someone, to realise them alone and together, which creates the sense of a personal agon in much of Thomas’s work.

But the search for Pindar’s transformer, the splendour of God, the acceptance by God of the no-one, is equally vital to Thomas’s project. Thomas becomes increasingly aware that the search for the self is the search for God; that the discovery of God is the discovery of the hidden or lost self. This search for and waiting on grace or acceptance can be seen as the driving force behind the poet’s metaphysical probings into the being and nature of God which become so prominent in the collections of the 1970s. In those collections Thomas can be found searching for positive evidence of God, for response and vocalisation from God, for the words or even for the sense of the words ‘you are accepted’.

What the prose passage from No-one reveals then, upon this closer inspection, are three foundations of Thomas’s project of the self. First, the search for the self is rooted in the recurring question of identity. Second, the answer to that question ‘who am I?’ entails the paradoxical possibility of being at once no-one and someone. Third, the discovery of the someone is contingent upon grace, that is, upon divine communication of acceptance of the no-one. These ideas comprise the points of departure in a study of Thomas’s poetry as autobiography. The six points which I will now explore in the remainder of this chapter, with reference to Thomas’s actual poems, are more particular and subtle elements which can be seen to arise from these three foundations.
Although this chapter treats these six points in a generally chronological order, and while the points themselves may seem to indicate a kind of linear development in Thomas’s work, it would be a simplification of the idea, and of the poetry, to categorise the project in this way. Thomas’s poetic movements are often circular and involve a scrupulous reworking of themes. Although some linear developments might be tracked, the ideas of return, variation and even contradiction are of equal importance to the expression of a whole and reality-based experience upon which the poet insists. Keeping in mind, then, that they are not intended as a chronological mapping, the six points to be treated are as follows.

1. The poetic project of self-discovery as an interior journey through obscurity toward contact with the lost self. This idea foregrounds the delicate, paradoxical nature of the relationship between the seeker and the lost self for Thomas.

2. The spiritual evolution of the seeker which, for Thomas, is integral to and dependent upon the search for the self. Thomas’s assertion of this evolutionary process introduces his notion of the multiplicity of interior selves. In particular he makes the important link between the receptivity of the seeker to the multiple voices within and the continued spiritual evolution of the seeker.

3. The interior wound as the source of poetry and the issue of its possible healing. This leads naturally into Thomas’s view of the poet’s role in society.

4. The appropriateness of the poet’s inner journey, powers assisting in that journey, and the mystical, supernatural context of which that journey becomes a part.

5. The inseparability of the search for the self and the search for God.

6. The questioning of the journey image in favour of the seeker’s turning aside as a means of reunification or arrival. This turning aside for Thomas enables a temporary defeat of time and healing of the wound, while itself becoming a source of poetry. Thomas’s stance can be seen to turn gradually from one of active pursuit to one of contemplative silence.

In all this we can see as well that, for Thomas, poetry does not merely function as tool in the work toward realisation of the self and God, but that poetry, its process, is the exploration and discovery of that self.

‘Long torture of delayed birth’

If ‘This To Do’ seems to indicate a project yet to be undertaken by the poet, ‘A Person From Porlock’ from *Song at the Year’s Turning* (1955) is evidence that the project has been ongoing since the beginning of...
Thomas’s poetic career. The poem is about an interruption in the poet’s writing by a ‘caller at the door’ and reveals some important aspects of Thomas’s idea of poetry as autobiography. The poem inverts our first point above by considering first the relationship of the seeker to the self before taking up the motif of the journey.

The poem’s central metaphor is that of birth. The narrator is interrupted while his mind is

big with the poem

Soon to be born, his nerves tense to endure
The long torture of delayed birth. (103)

But as early as line 2 Thomas reveals that the caller is ‘eternal, nameless’, not a particular person from Porlock, as in Coleridge’s footnote to ‘Kubla Khan’, but the perpetual diversion and division which threatens to abort the poem’s safe passage into light. We are reminded of this again in stanza 2 when Thomas relates that the caller is ‘casual’, a ‘chance cipher that jogs / The poet’s elbow, spilling the cupped dream’. Thomas is highlighting two aspects of his own poetic process here: the concentration and suffering required of the poet to bring the poem safely to birth, and the extreme delicacy of the whole undertaking. In the first case the poet, with ‘the stillness about his brain’, is ‘tense to endure / The long torture of delayed birth’. In the second case the poem is referred to as both ‘the embryo’ and ‘the cupped dream’. But as a result of the chance interruption the embryo is ‘maimed’, the cupped dream ‘spilled’. Already what we see here is not the poet exhuming the preserved carcass of the poem in its entirety from the bog-preserve of memory, as in Heaney, but a much more interior process involving the poet’s own physiology and calling up ideas of conception, gestation, development. Thomas is suggesting here an interior growth of a living creature whose survival is by no means assured, precarious as a cupped dream, vulnerable to the chance ciphers which divert the poet’s intent. But something of equal importance here is that we do not perceive the poet so much as the maker, the word-smith of the poem, as the feminine vessel, the womb within which the poem is nurtured to maturity. Thomas portrays at once a strange remove as well as a deep intimacy between the poet and the poem. They are one, the poem wholly dependent on the poet, and yet they are also distinct, the poem developing out of a force paradoxically beyond and within the poet which ‘uses’ the poet. We lack here the sense of the poem as something achieved, except in its being brought successfully to birth by the poet.²

In the last stanza of the poem the narrator, having been called away from the poem’s birth at its critical moment, must make his long return:
‘No-one with a crown of light’

The encounter over, he came, seeking his room;
Seeking the contact with his lost self;
Groping his way endlessly back
On the poem’s path, calling by name
The foetus stifling in the mind’s gloom.

These lines foreground the whole idea of interior journeying which is central to ‘This To Do’ and, indeed, to Thomas’s poetic project as a whole. ‘His room’ here is, of course, not only the poet’s actual room but the inner room of the mind as a womb ‘big with the poem / Soon to be born’. Isolating the verb sequence in the sentence out of which the stanza is composed both highlights this motif of the inward journey and underscores the opacity of that journey, its characteristic obscurity: seeking, seeking, groping, calling, stifling. What the narrator is seeking is the embryo, the cupped dream. But, significantly, not only has the embryo become a foetus, having grown in the narrator’s absence; it is also referred to as the ‘lost self’ with which the narrator seeks contact. Here again we can sense the poet’s intimacy with ‘the other’ as well as his detachment. The narrator is able to call the foetus by name, but that he is calling at all is indication of their separation. The poem becomes not merely the expression of a search for contact with the lost self but a map, a path ‘endlessly back’ to where the child lies ‘stifling in the mind’s gloom’. Here again is the straining of poetic sight in the mind’s dark on a journey toward the lost self.3

‘The Letter’, from Thomas’s Poetry for Supper (1958) is also a poem about the process of poetic composition. The letter of the title may as readily be a poem as a correspondence. And though Thomas makes reference to geographical locations, those names become metaphors for places

That the spirit recalls from earlier journeys
Through the dark wood, seeking the path
To the bright mansions. (26)

In these images one can see again the interior journeying and attendant visual obscurity which characterise, for Thomas, the project of the self. ‘The Letter’ is not, however, simply a reiteration of the philosophy of composition we find in ‘A Person from Porlock’. Thomas adds two significant variations here. First, in stanza 2 Thomas writes of man’s ‘long growth / From seed to flesh, flesh to spirit’, suggesting that man’s journey into the ‘dark wood’ of himself, while primarily at this stage a search for contact with the lost self, is not merely a symptom of his earthly life
but functions on another level as a catalyst in his larger evolutionary movement from non-being (seed) to physical being (flesh) to spiritual being (spirit). The letter is both a record of, and an instrument in, this movement from flesh to spirit, thus adding to the search for the lost self a wider spiritual dimension which, as we shall see, becomes important in the later poems. Second, we learn in the final stanza of the poem that the pen with which the letter is written is dipped ‘in black ink of the heart’s well’. But while we are led to assume that the narrator has composed the letter himself, we find, in the concluding lines, that it is the hand that ‘has written / To the many voices’ quiet dictation’. Here again are the simultaneous intimacy and distance which the poet experiences in relation to the inner self. But significantly in this case it is not the inner self but the inner selves. The dictation is by the ‘many voices’. Once again the narrator has come seeking through darkness for the lost self, the hidden self, but when that self is discovered it is not only other than the seeking self but is many rather than one. As in ‘A Person From Porlock’ the successful birth of the poem or letter requires the poet’s strict attentiveness to these inner selves. The narrator must agree to become, in part, an instrument of the many selves in order to continue in his ‘long growth / From seed to flesh, flesh to spirit’. Thus we find in ‘The Letter’, in conjunction with our second point above, an expansion of the context within which the search for the self takes place, a multiplication of the inner selves and a necessary receptivity to those selves as significant additions to the project of poetry as autobiography in R. S. Thomas.

Another crucial aspect of Thomas’s project of poetry as a form of autobiography, our third in the list above, is highlighted in his first collection of the Aberdaron period, Not that He Brought Flowers (1968), in the short and somewhat inconspicuous ‘No’. For Thomas poetry seems frequently to be the product of an interior pain, a sustained wound, a deep sense of grief over the broken condition of humankind and its inability to heal itself. The first prose sequence in the autobiographical collection The Echoes Return Slow (1988), examined briefly in the Introduction, traces this sense of the wound to the remembered moment of birth:

Time would have its work cut out in smoothing the birth-marks in the flesh. The marks in the spirit would not heal. The dream would recur, groping his way up to the light, coming to the crack too narrow to squeeze through. (2)

Here we have both the marking of flesh and spirit at birth and the poet’s helplessness to remedy either. Time may smooth the flesh but Thomas is...
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adamant that ‘the marks in the spirit would not heal’. Coupled with this sense of crippling and inadequacy is the recurrent dream of ‘the light’, here not only the light after the darkness of the womb, but the light as healing, as spiritual wholeness and resurrection from the brokenness Thomas seems to feel is endemic to human existence. Thus the project of poetry becomes, for R. S. Thomas, an exploration of the wound, a searching of it partly, but not merely, because it hurts, but primarily because, if understood rightly, the wound may provide an access to the light which Thomas envisions as always just beyond reach.

The poem ‘No’, while in some ways enigmatic, is clear in its depiction of poetry as the product of this examination of the wound. In the poem the nameless man is a singer approached by the ‘Thing’, here evil and sin, which causes him to retch. Significantly, none of the onlookers knows why the Thing has caused such a reaction in the man. And though the Thing allows the man a short respite, eventually it touches him with its raw hand. At that touch, Thomas tells us,

the wound took
Over, and the nurses wiped off
The poetry from his cracked lips. (10)

Not only is this a graphic portrayal of the wound as the source of poetry but it highlights what, for Thomas, is one of the essential roles of the poet in society. As he relates in the phrase ‘none knew why’, the poet exists emotionally ‘outside of’ the masses in his highly developed sensitivity to the Thing. This sensitivity and consequent wounding effectively isolate him from the others who never fully understand it. For Thomas the creative artist is set apart, privileged even, to suffer more deeply than others, an idea which, as I have suggested already in the Introduction, he shares with Kierkegaard. For both men the creative artist becomes a kind of wounded icon doomed by his very nature to a suffering which, paradoxically, is the key to his art: his wound is, simultaneously, his gift. This is depicted equally powerfully in the picture-poem ‘Guernica’ which accompanies Picasso’s painting of the same name in the collection Ingrowing Thoughts (1985). Thomas claims that

The painter
has been down at the root
of the scream and surfaced
again to prepare the affections
for the atrocity of its flowers. (9)
In these lines the poet is clearly writing about his own project as much as Picasso's. In an image reminiscent of 'This To Do' the painter goes down to the root of the scream and surfaces again. The root is here both the door to the lost self and the door to the wound. The atrocious flowers in the poem’s final line are, of course, the product of the visited root. The image is strangely appropriate. The flowers/paintings/poems are a natural exhalation of the root, screams emanating from a buried source with which the artist comes into contact. The results of that contact, the flowering of art, are often as frightening as they are beautiful.

Thomas’s volume *Frequencies* (1978) is the last in the Aberdaron period before his retirement to nearby Sarn Rhiw. We find two things highlighted in *Frequencies* which expand our understanding of Thomas’s project of poetic autobiography. These expansions refer to my fourth point of inquiry. The first is an affirmation that the journey inwards and downwards to make contact with the lost self and explore the wound is not always one characterised by fear and foreboding, as images up to this point tend to indicate. The second expansion is one in which the search for the lost self becomes contextualised in a wider and somewhat mystical spiritual dimension.

In the poem from sequence 35 of *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988) Thomas refers to his mind as ‘this dark pool I / lean over’ and writes of probing that dark pool in the disturbing image of

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putting my hand
down, groping with bleeding
fingers for truths too
frightening to be brought up. (71)
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And yet in *Frequencies*, in the poems ‘Groping’, ‘In Context’, and ‘Night Sky’ we find evidence of the appropriateness and the pleasures of the poet’s inward journey. ‘Groping’ does not merely indicate the darkness of the journey, but includes hands, voices, lights without shadow which become for the poet guiding, reassuring spirits:

Moving away is only to the boundaries
of the self. Better to stay here,
I said, leaving the horizons
clear. The best journey to make
is inward. It is the interior
that calls. Eliot heard it.
Wordsworth turned from the great hills
of the north to the precipice of his own mind, and let himself down for the poetry stranded on the bare ledges.

For some it is all darkness; for me, too, it is dark. But there are hands there I can take, voices to hear solider than the echoes without. And sometimes a strange light shines, purer than the moon, casting no shadow, that is the halo upon the bones of the pioneers who died for truth. (12)

In the first stanza Thomas rejects an exterior ‘moving away’ as essentially superficial, as merely an escape to ‘the boundaries / of the self’. The poet also affirms in stanza one the interior call and places himself in a tradition of poetic responses to that interior call. Even Wordsworth, Thomas claims, turned from his cherished exteriors in nature in order to scale an inner landscape where poetry resided. The final stanza of the poem begins by affirming the darkness up to this point so characteristic of the poet’s journey. But central to the poem is Thomas’s insistence that the hands to take and the voices to hear are both more substantial than the dark and ‘solider than the echoes / without’. By this Thomas indicates both the appropriateness of the poetic response to the interior call and the succour, and even pleasure, which that response can elicit. The contemplative life of interiors becomes here, for Thomas, a more substantial reality than the exterior life of the senses.

In the final five lines of ‘Groping’ Thomas describes a ‘strange light’ that is ‘purer than the moon’ and which casts no shadow as it becomes a ‘halo upon the bones of the pioneers who died for truth’. This strange light that sometimes falls is the ultimate confirmation for Thomas that his interior journeying is of the highest calling and that, while at times perilous and difficult, it is no less than divinely ordained. It also points to a widening of the context of the poet’s search from the merely personal to the supernatural or cosmic. This opening out of the context of the search is developed more fully, though still vaguely, in ‘In Context’, the poem which directly follows ‘Groping’. ‘In Context’ depicts the narrator as being acted upon by those same cosmic, ‘unseen forces’. There is considerable disproportion in the co-operation of the narrator with these unseen forces:
There was a larger pattern we worked at: they on a big loom, I with a small needle. (13)

What one senses here is the poet’s expanding vision of his project in which he plays a minor role in a larger, more mysterious plan. Thomas writes that

a power guided
my hand. If an invisible company waited to see what I would do,
I in my own way asked for direction, so we should journey together
a little nearer the accomplishment of the design.

And again:

It was not
I who lived, but life rather
that lived me.

What we are seeing in both of these poems is that, for Thomas, the journey within is the response to a definite call. While that response is both difficult and frightening, it also yields art to the extent that the conscious will is subsumed into the voice of the other, the lost self or selves which somehow partake of the supernatural world. Such a forfeiture of will appears to make possible an assistance in the journey by inner forces previously unknown, as well as to involve the poet increasingly in a significantly wider supernatural context.

This sense of being caught up into the larger elemental life of the universe is dramatically illustrated in ‘Night Sky’, also from Frequencies. Thomas writes that

Every night
is a rinsing myself of the darkness

that is in my veins. I let the stars inject me
with fire, silent as it is far,
but certain in its cauterising
of my despair. (18)

The words ‘I let’ suggest that this connection to higher power is, to some extent at least, an act of the will. We should also note how the narrator’s partaking in this higher life is a rinsing of the darkness within and affords
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a cauterising of the wound. The final lines of the poem describe a meditative state in which the journey inward has produced a unity with the supernatural and ubiquitous power without:

Resting in the intervals
of my breathing, I pick up the signals
relayed to me from a periphery I comprehend.

The rhythmic breath and rest of the narrator and the ease with which he receives the supernatural signals, even his mere comprehension of the periphery, all stand in stark contrast to the angst-ridden explorations of obscurity typical of Thomas's journeying.

Two final aspects of Thomas's project of poetry as autobiography remain to be explored here, corresponding to points five and six above. Both of these aspects appear (though not for the first time) in *Frequencies* and become prominent in the poems of the Rhiw period. As we have seen, Thomas's search for the self becomes grounded in a larger and somewhat mysterious spiritual context almost Whitmanesque in its dimensions. But we can also see developing in Thomas's search for the self a unification with the more particular search for God. God becomes relocated in these poems as a being not so much 'out there', as he, she or it is typically portrayed in Thomas's collections from the 1970s, as a God 'in here', whose discovery by the poet is increasingly a part of the self-discovery undertaken in poetry. The first stanza of 'Pilgrimages' is typical in its portrayal of search after the elusive God. Thomas writes that

He is such a fast
God, always before us and
leaving as we arrive. (51)

Here is the image of the search for the anthropomorphised God as a journey outward from the self, with God forever moving off ahead of the poet's constantly outward probing. But in the final lines of the poem Thomas poses a rhetorical question that effectively reverses that older image, replacing it with a new realisation:

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?
The journey outward becomes a return to the self, and not only to the self but specifically to a God of interiors who is dark and inexplicable, in much the same way as the self. The poem ‘Perhaps’, also from Frequencies, reinforces this idea in a more complex way. Here the narrator looks into the mirror of his own intellect for God, that is, he looks into himself, but finds, at first, only God’s absence there. The poet tells us that

Looking in that mirror was a journey through hill mist where, the higher one ascends, the poorer the visibility becomes. (39)

Here is the search of the mirrored self for God characterised as a journey through obscurity. But although Thomas asserts God’s absence from the mirror in the beginning of the poem, he goes on to state in lines 11–13 that the journey

could have led to despair but for the consciousness of a presence behind him, whose breath clouding that looking-glass proved that it was alive.

While God is never clearly delineated in the looking glass of the self the narrator is none the less distinctly conscious of his presence and finds for proof of his existence the very cloud that obscures him. Further, it is in the search for the self that God’s presence is finally discerned. Indeed, for Thomas the search for the self becomes the search for God.

The final aspect we must turn to here is point six, Thomas’s own challenging, in the later poetry, of the adequacy of the journey as an image. Does the journey ever end? Are the self and God fully realisable in this life? Does one proceed to a terminus, to the end of a stage, only to begin a new stage? Does the wound heal? Is the interior pressure of seeking relieved? And if the wound is healed and the terminus reached, what then?

Thomas suggests in the poem ‘Travels’, from Frequencies, that his journeying has been in error to the extent that it has led him away from what he calls ‘the smooth pupil / of water’ (38). That water is a stationary stillness requiring one to turn aside from movement in order to contemplate its depths. Thomas rejects his previous journeying in this poem as a kind of self-deceit, a movement away from the self which might have been approached in the stillness of the pool that was always available to him. In the poem the narrator feels
the coldness
of unplumbed depths I should have
stayed here to fathom.

Water here, the still pool of water, is the element in which the self and God can finally be realised. In disregarding the still pool Thomas claims to be doomed to watch

the running
away of the resources
of water to form those far
seas that men must endeavour
to navigate on their voyage home.

Thus, once the pool is forsaken, the voyage home becomes a return to beginnings. The element and resource of still water in which the self and God reside run out to become obstacles, ‘far seas’ that must now be navigated in order to recover the still pool. This turning aside to an acceptance of the spiritual plenitude at hand becomes increasingly, for Thomas, an overturning of the corrupting influence of time and a corresponding realisation of eternity. Thus journeying for the poet is juxtaposed to an acceptance in which can be found the elusive self, the elusive God, the healing of the wound, the terminus of the search and which is also, for Thomas, the proper end of human existence.9

This pausing by the still pool is the subject of the painting-poem ‘Cézanne: The Bridge at Maincy’ from Between Here and Now (1981). Thomas writes that the empty bridge is

awaiting
the traveller’s return
from the outside
world to his place
at the handrail to
watch for the face’s
water-lily to emerge
from the dark depths. (49)

The still pool waits for the traveller’s return from a journeying outside of or beyond himself. It is only upon his return and by way of his watching of the dark depths that the water-lily of his face will finally emerge. This image of flowers is of course reminiscent of the other painting-poem, ‘Guernica’, in which flowers emerge from contact with the roots of the hidden self. But it is ultimately the turning aside that is important
here. The traveller returns ‘to his place / at the handrail to / watch’. It
is precisely this finding of one’s place at the still pool to watch for the self
to emerge that the poem seeks to highlight.²⁹

Another example of this halting in the journey and turning aside to
a revelation of eternity in the present moment is Thomas’s ‘The Bright
Field’ from the 1975 collection Laboratories of the Spirit, a poem I will
examine more closely in Chapter 3. Thomas writes that

Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

In these lines the ephemeral moment becomes an occasion for the poet’s
perception of the eternal. Clearly the emphasis here is not on journey-
ing, but precisely on a withdrawal from the journeying, both its back-
ward probing of the ‘imagined past’ and its forward anticipations of the
‘receding future’, in favour of a present-tense waiting which becomes
expanded into what might be called, for Thomas, a sacramental experi-
ence of the eternal in time.

Thomas writes powerfully about this possibility of a transcendence
of time in the 1990 volume Counterpoint as well:

But the silence in the mind
is when we live best, within
listening distance of the silence
we call God. This is the deep
calling to deep of the psalm
writer …

It is a presence, then,
whose margins are our margins;
that calls us out over our
own fathoms. What to do
but draw a little nearer to
such ubiquity by remaining still. (50)

Paradoxically in these lines, we ‘draw a little nearer’ to God ‘by remain-
ing still’. Here also is the finding of the self in a God who ‘calls us out
over our own fathoms’. Instead of God at a far remove, disappearing
upon one’s arrival, we find here a ubiquitous presence ‘whose margins
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are our margins’. The seemingly disparate elements of time and eternity achieve a conflation to unity here that becomes the defeat of time and alienation and a temporary healing of the wound. Although the wound for Thomas continues to be a primary source of poetry, never fully healing in this life, this turning aside to eternity and healing itself becomes, simultaneously and paradoxically in his work, a source of poetry as well. Together the two sources, the wound and its healing, time and eternity, form a kind of dialectic between the reality of the lost self and the dream of its rediscovery.10

The opening lines of ‘The Reason’ from Mass for Hard Times (1992) begin with characteristic angst:

I gird myself for the agon.
And there at the beginning
is the word. (27)

Here the word at the beginning is both the poem and Christ, destinations which, while obscured, are also at hand, which are both in time and out of time. In the poem the journey progresses:

Nearer the sound,
neither animal nor human,
drawn out through the wrenched
mouth of the oracle at Delphi.
Nearer the cipher the Christ
wrote on the ground, with no one
without sin to peer at it
over his shoulder.

Slowly the agon of the journey is relieved for the poet. The poem’s final image is not one of underwater probing or of the pangs of birth or of dredging up with bloody hands the frightening truth but, through a turning aside, the blind man’s discovery of the word, the momentary realisation not only of the self but of the eternal nature of that self as it exists in God. That discovery and realisation are a place for the poet to rest finally, sitting down in the ‘mysterious presence’ that is the warmth of a heart beating:

my place, perhaps,
is to sit down in a mysterious
presence, leaving the vocabularies
to toil, the machine to eviscerate
its resources; learning we are here
not necessarily to read on,
but to explore with blind
fingers the word in the cold,
until the snow turn to feathers
and somewhere far down we come
upon warmth and a heart beating.

The task which Thomas sets down for himself in ‘This To Do’ turns out to be the project of poetry itself, an ongoing exploration of often murky interiors and pain which reveals not only the deep and often paradoxical complexity of identity for Thomas but equally his discovery, as here, of sudden transformations, arrivals, intimations of immortality as a part of identity. *Gnothi seauton* entails, for Thomas, not only the poetic journey ‘far down’ in the cold but repeated discoveries there of ‘warmth and a heart beating’.

Part I has highlighted a particular *interiority* in R. S. Thomas’s poetry, an instinct towards introspection as a primary action of self-discovery. It is important to remember, however, that Thomas is not merely self-referential in his meditations on identity. The natural world and its struggle with an emerging scientific mastery become the settings for Thomas’s ongoing probes. Thomas is simultaneously a poet of *exterior*, exploring identity not only as the product of individual isolation but as inseparable from context and contextual strife. It is to Thomas’s deepening preoccupation with environment, with a mystical connection to the natural world and the challenges posed by science, that we now turn in Part II.

Notes

1 The title of the autobiography itself points up the paradox one is forced to grapple with here. The Welsh *nêb* translates into English as no-one or nobody, an ironic title in the genre of autobiography which finds its entire grounding and justification in the idea of a substantial *someone*.

2 Contrast Thomas’s explicitly feminine imagery here with a more masculine and aggressive image of the poet in ‘The Maker’ from the collection *Tares* (1961).

3 See also the poem ‘Navigation’ from *No Truce with the Furies* (1995).

4 Although this assertion by Thomas seems true of the late Wordsworth, it is clearly descriptive of a shift in Thomas himself, indicating more of a departure from Wordsworth than a parallel with him.

5 See Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’ as perhaps the fullest expression of his achieved oneness with both the flesh of the earth and the supernatural powers which he perceives as infusing the wider universe.

6 The image of the mirror is a major one for Thomas, especially in relation to exploration of the self and God. Compare the poem ‘Looking Glass’ from
'No-one with a crown of light'

Experimenting with an Amen (1986) to the prose passage in sequence 54 of the 1988 The Echoes Return Slow (108). See also the poems beginning 'I waited upon' and 'It is one of those faces', from the 1990 collection Counterpoint (45–6).

See Chapter 7 for a discussion of the *via negativa* in Thomas's religious poetry.

See the poems 'Aside' and 'Stations' in the collection *Mass for Hard Times* (1992) as further examples of this. Thomas writes in these poems of 'a turning aside, / a bending over a still pool' in order 'to hold the position / assigned to us' (34, 16).


For more on this see my article 'Reality and the Dream in the Recent Poetry of R. S. Thomas', *New Welsh Review*, 44 (spring 1999).
1 St Michael and All Angels church, Manafon, Montgomeryshire. Thomas took up his post as vicar here in 1942 at the age of twenty-nine.

2 The Rectory at Manafon where Thomas lived from 1942 to 1954.
3 R. S. Thomas during a private reading at St Michael’s church, Manafon in August 1998.

4 St Michael’s church, Eglwysfach, between Aberystwyth and Machynlleth. Thomas lived in the Rectory at Eglwysfach from 1954 to 1967.
5 St Hywyn's churchyard, Aberdaron on Penrhyn Lleyn where Thomas was vicar from 1967 to 1978.

6 The cottage at Sarn-y-Rhiw overlooking Porth Neigwl (Hell's Mouth) on Lleyn. Thomas retired to the cottage in 1978.