

**A God of Grass and Pen:  
R.S. Thomas and the Romantic Imagination**

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Many scholars see Romantic influences in the early work of R.S. Thomas, but most argue that his mature poetry is quintessentially un-Romantic. For example, Anthony Conran believes that Thomas's early "romantic view...is gradually weathered and eroded away,"<sup>1</sup> and Anne Stevenson writes that the mature Thomas, "having got rid of his Romantic, idealized illusions, faces with horror the intolerable condition of the world without them."<sup>2</sup> Yet studying Thomas's poetry and prose has convinced me that he never "gets rid" of his Romantic instincts, despite his tendency to "face [the world] with horror." In fact, Thomas offers a "sustained critique" not of Romanticism, but of a *world* that has "eroded away"—a world that has abandoned Romantic imagination. Frustrated at being a "[prisoner] of an age that is at best unimaginative,"<sup>3</sup> Thomas intends to resist the anti-romantic Modern spirit. Moreover, as he struggles with his personal faith, the poet's Romantic imagination defines his attempts to commune with God.

Romantic notions of imagination are an intrinsic part of Thomas's work, but there are several possible reasons why they are often undervalued or overlooked. Perhaps one reason is that his prototypical peasant, Iago Prytherch, is devoid of imagination. Conversely, one recalls that in the preface to the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*, which is probably the closest thing we have to a Romantic manifesto, Wordsworth argues for a kind of primitivism, part of which is the idea that rustic thought and language are essentially poetic. He argues that "simple" people (perhaps especially farmers) are capable of tremendous, though unschooled, imagination. But the vacant-minded Prytherch has fallen into the ritualistic life of his kind, so preoccupied with the plow and the rigid demands of his labors that he "has laid waste the brain's/Potential richness in delight/And beauty."<sup>4</sup> The hill farmer therefore has a deep-rooted, physical affinity with Wales, but not an imaginative one.

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Conran, *The Cost of Strangeness: Essays on the English Poets of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1982), 252.

<sup>2</sup> Stevenson, Ann. "The Uses of Prytherch," *New England Review*, v. 15 no. 4. (Fall 1993): 83.

<sup>3</sup> R.S. Thomas, *Selected Prose* (London: Seren, 1995), 72.

<sup>4</sup> R.S. Thomas, "Priest and Peasant," *Song at the Year's Turning* (London: Hart-Davis, 1955), 109.

Thomas's style is not overtly Romantic, either. With the exception of his early work, he eschews end-rhyme, blank verse, ballad stanzas, and other conventions of the Romantics; the terse free verse and non-syntactical line breaks he employs are clearly Modern. Thomas is also patently contemptuous toward the border-crashing English, and Romantic poetry, though it emerged first in Germany and France, is most often discussed as a product of nineteenth-century England. Whether for these reasons or others, critics have often disregarded Thomas's significant debt to the Romantics, and the resulting interpretations are similar to the following, by A. E. Dyson:

Thomas is not a Wordsworthian poet, and his "nature" is not Wordsworth's; it is history, rather than divinity, which he responds to most, in the bleak beauty of Wales. In Christian terms, Thomas is not a poet of the transfiguration, of the resurrection, of human holiness. . . He is a poet of the cross, the unanswered prayer, the bleak trek through darkness.<sup>5</sup>

Part of Dyson's statement should be inverted: in nature, it is divinity, rather than history, which Thomas responds to most. He certainly acknowledges history, and he is without question a "poet of the cross, the unanswered prayer, the bleak trek through darkness," but to what end? How, one wonders, and for what purpose, does Thomas "trek?" And what of his poems which are not "bleak?" Thomas finds the God of nature elusive, but when He reveals Himself, he does so through the natural world. God's reflection, His shadow, and His echo exist in the Welsh hills. His influence there is both a presence and an absence (and, at times, an absence that is like a presence). Because Dyson focuses primarily on the difficulties of Thomas's faith, he overlooks the process of faith and the real, if infrequent, rewards the poet's faith produces. My purpose is to show how these rewards are tied to Thomas's Romantic imagination and how nature, more than anything else, offers his imagination the material it needs to commune with God and make the trek *out* of darkness. In this way, Thomas is very much a "Wordsworthian" poet.

Volumes have been written on Romantic concepts of imagination, and I will not attempt an overview; indeed, the Romantics themselves reach no consensus as to the precise nature of the word. One commonality does exist in their various definitions, however: the Romantics link the creative imagination with epistemology—that is, they almost universally assert that they can approach Truth through a creative process. Wordsworth extols a "wise passiveness"<sup>6</sup> in which the creative imagination can diffuse and order nature's elements, thus enabling the "quiet eye" to "see into the life of things."<sup>7</sup> Coleridge's well-known argument, which Thomas often quotes, is for a bipartite imagination. The primary imagination is "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." The secondary imagination is "an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will. . . [which] dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to create."<sup>8</sup> Shelley, for his part, argues in his Defence that imagination colors thoughts with its own life, and "[composes] from

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<sup>5</sup> Dyson, A. E. Yeats, Eliot, and R.S. Thomas: Riding the Echo (New Jersey: Humanities, 1981), 296.

<sup>6</sup> "Expostulation and Reply," printed in R.S. Thomas, ed. A Choice of Wordsworth's Verse (London: Faber, 1973); Thomas specifically mentions this poem in his introduction to the volume.

<sup>7</sup> "Lines: Tintern Abbey," printed in A Choice of Wordsworth's Verse; in his introduction to the volume, Thomas mentions the importance of the lines "we are laid asleep/in body, and become a living soul;/While with an eye made quiet by the power/Of harmony, and the deep power of joy/we see into the life of things."

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, extracts printed in Romanticism: an Anthology, ed. Duncan Wu (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 525.

them, as from elements, other thoughts.” To this he adds, “A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth.”<sup>9</sup> All of these poets, whether speaking of “composing,” “ordering,” or “creating,” believe that the imagination, through its creative processes, leads to truth.

R.S. Thomas also believes that imaginative creativity leads to truth, particularly religious truth. As he tells John Ormond, “Imaginative truth is the most immediate way of presenting ultimate reality to a human being,” and “[that] ultimate reality is what we call God.”<sup>10</sup> In this vein, Thomas often writes of “turning aside,” a biblical allusion that becomes very important in his work. In Exodus 3:3, Moses, confronted with the burning bush, says, “I will now turn aside and see this great sight.” In Thomas’s poems, the implication is that Moses, who becomes a prototype of the poet, would have missed the miracle if he had not “turned.” The decision to take time, to be patient—“I will now turn aside”—is a choice that Thomas sees the world reject, but that is vital to his faith and to his poetry.

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.<sup>11</sup>

It is by “turning aside” that the poet ignites his imagination. Thomas’s preference for wild places, his rejection of city life, and his poems that revile “the machine” all stem to some degree from his belief in the essentiality of an undistracted “turn” to nature.

I know that bush,  
Moses; there are many of them  
in Wales in the autumn, braziers  
where the imagination  
warms itself...

And in this country  
of failure, the rain  
falling out of a black  
cloud in gold pieces there  
are none to gather,  
I have often thought  
of the fountain of my people  
that played beautifully here

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<sup>9</sup> P.B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, printed in Wu, *Romanticism: an Anthology*, 944.

<sup>10</sup> “R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet. A transcript of John Ormond’s film for BBC Television, broadcast on April 2nd, 1972; introduced by Sam Adams,” *Poetry Wales*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Spring 1972): 54.

<sup>11</sup> R.S. Thomas, “The Bright Field,” *Laboratories of the Spirit* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 60.

once in the sun's light  
like a tree undressing.<sup>12</sup>

The “failure” Thomas ascribes to Wales in this poem is that its people lack imagination. God still offers manna, but “there are none to gather” it. The implied accusation is that the world is too busy gathering actual gold to “turn aside” to the more important, spiritual gold that Thomas seeks.

In his important introduction to The Penguin Book of Religious Verse, Thomas paraphrases Coleridge's definition of the imagination, discussing how God and poetry are both approached imaginatively.

The nearest we approach God...is as creative beings. The poet, by echoing the primary imagination, recreates. Through his work he forces those who read him to do the same, thus bringing them... nearer to the actual being of God as displayed in action.<sup>13</sup>

Now the power of the imagination is a unifying power, hence the force of metaphor; and the poet is the supreme manipulator of metaphor... the world needs the unifying power of the imagination. The two things that give it best are poetry and religion.<sup>14</sup>

With these excerpts in mind, I have divided the remainder of this study into two parts. The first, entitled “A God of Grass,” demonstrates how, on occasion, Thomas's imagination allows him to compose God's image from natural elements. It also shows how imaginative failure often prevents Thomas from communing with God. The second section, “A God of Pen,” discusses how man's relationship to God is based on metaphor, and it addresses the relationship between imagination and poetry. In that section, I also discuss how Thomas's imagination is limited by what he can name, and I consider his possible motivations for writing poems about imaginative failure.

### **A God of Grass**

In Genesis, God is first introduced as Creator. Interestingly, there are several Hebrew verbs for His creative actions, and although they are sometimes used interchangeably, each has a slightly different shade of meaning. The verb “*bara*,” for example, always has God as its subject, and it signifies a creation from nothing—the *ex nihilo* creation to which most Orthodoxy subscribes. The Hebrew verb “*asab*,” on the other hand, is a verb also given to man, and it is sometimes used to describe the fashioning of existing materials, as when God creates Adam from the dust of the earth. The Romantic imagination coincides with this second type of creation. As Thomas mentions in his “Abercuawg” speech, man—because he is a created being—cannot comprehend the infinite.<sup>15</sup> His creativity is grounded in the element and matter he knows. Yet in arranging this finite matter, he enters an eternal reality. This is also Blake's idea:

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<sup>12</sup> R.S. Thomas, “The Bush,” Later Poems (London: Macmillan, 1983), 194.

<sup>13</sup> R.S. Thomas, ed. The Penguin Book of Religious Verse (Suffolk: Penguin, 1963), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas, Penguin Book of Religious Verse, 8-9.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, Selected Prose, 131.

This world of Imagination is infinite and Eternal, whereas the world of Generation, or Vegetation, is Finite and Temporal. There Exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature. All things are comprehended in their Eternal Forms in the divine body of the Saviour, the True Vine of Eternity, The Human Imagination.<sup>16</sup>

Of Blake's "Permanent Realities," none is more "Permanent" than the reality of God Himself. More than anything else, it is He that is "reflected" in "Nature."

I take my place  
by a lily-flower, believing  
with Blake that when God comes

he comes sometimes by way  
of the nostril.<sup>17</sup>

The Creator is accessible through His creations. If one will "take [his] place" and be patient (again the act of "turning aside"), the imagination can unveil God.

In his poem "Emerging," Thomas writes that because "no God leans down/out of the air to take the hand/extended to him...he must be put together," for "matter is the scaffolding of spirit."<sup>18</sup> Filtered through the poet's imagination, nature undergoes an artistic ordering, and the result is an image of God "put together" by imagination. Consider the poem "Alive":

It is alive. It is you,  
God. Looking out I can see  
no death. The earth moves, the  
sea moves, the wind goes  
on its exuberant  
journeys. Many creatures  
reflect you, the flowers  
your color, the tides the precision  
of your calculations. There  
is nothing too ample  
for you to overflow, nothing  
so small that your workmanship  
is not revealed. I listen  
and it is you speaking.  
I find the place where you lay  
warm. At night, if I waken,  
there are the sleepless conurbations  
of the stars. The darkness  
is the deepening shadow

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<sup>16</sup> William Blake, "A Vision of the Last Judgment," quoted in C.M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination*, (London: Oxford UP, 1969).

<sup>17</sup> R.S. Thomas, "Retired," *Mass for Hard Times* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1992), 23.

<sup>18</sup> R.S. Thomas, *Frequencies* (London: Macmillan 1978), 41.

of your presence; the silence a  
process in the metabolism  
of the being of love.<sup>19</sup>

In this poem, God's image is revealed in earth, wind, flower, and tide; things both dark and light are part of His "metabolism." This is nature under the influence of imagination: a divine, spiritual essence and a manifestation of a higher power—the "reflection" of God in the natural world. This is pure Lake School doctrine. As Coleridge writes in "Frost at Midnight," "[In nature] thou shalt see and hear/The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible/Of that eternal language, which thy God/Utters, who from eternity doth teach/Himself in all, and all things in himself." Imagination allows Thomas to "see into the life of things"—indeed, to see the world as the life of God.

Thomas's imagination, however, is rarely as successful as it is in "Alive." It is often distracted by his reasoning intellect. In short, he loses Keats's "negative capability" and gets bogged down in "uncertainties, mysteries, [and] doubts," irritably "reaching after fact and reason."<sup>20</sup> He wants answers to his difficult questions. Who, what, and where is God? Why does He allow, even demand suffering? Why do petitions go unanswered? Like so many believers, R.S. Thomas wants evidence to justify his faith. Reading his poems, one perceives that although Thomas believes in Job-like patience, he often does not possess it. He has spoken plainly of his "struggle to balance off the urgency of [his] need for revelation with the need for patience"<sup>21</sup>—a true Romantic conundrum. Unfortunately, studies of Thomas have chiefly focused on his "need for patience," while his "urgency. . . for revelation" has largely gone ignored. Thomas once spoke in a television program of patiently waiting 3 hours for a rare bird to reappear. "I'm not sure I'd wait 3 hours for God," he said, with a wry smile.<sup>22</sup> That self-deprecating quip expressed Thomas's awareness of his own predicament: discerning God's presence required a patience that he often lacked.

Thus, when Thomas seeks God's image in nature, the reflection is often missed.<sup>23</sup> As he writes in "Emerging," nature can both "reveal" and "conceal" God.<sup>24</sup> When viewed through impatient eyes, nature reinforces doubt more than it augments belief. A good illustration of this notion appears in the poem "Threshold":

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

I have heard the still, small voice

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<sup>19</sup> R.S. Thomas, "Alive," *Laboratories of the Spirit* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 51.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from John Keats to George and Tom Keats, 21 December 1817 (extract), printed in Wu, *Romanticism: an Anthology*, 1019.

<sup>21</sup> "R.S. Thomas: Priest and Poet," 51.

<sup>22</sup> "A Strange Bird," written by Damian Walford Davies. Originally broadcast in 1998. Rebroadcast by BBC2 in Wales on 26 September 2000 to mark Thomas's death.

<sup>23</sup> See the poem "Via Negativa," *H'm*, 16; Thomas writes, "We look at people/And places as though he had looked/At them, too; but miss the reflection.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, *Frequencies*, 41.

and it was that of bacteria  
demolishing my cosmos. I  
have lingered too long on

this threshold, but where can I go?  
To look back is to lose the soul  
I was leading upwards towards  
the light. To look forward? Ah,

what balance is needed at  
the edges of such an abyss.  
I am left alone on the surface  
of a turning planet. What

to do but, like Michelangelo's  
Adam, put my hand  
out into unknown space,  
hoping for the reciprocating touch?<sup>25</sup>

The beginning of the poem alludes to the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19:

And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave.

Like Elijah in the biblical account, Thomas emerges from a cave, sees things pass by, and finds the Lord in none of them. But Thomas's cave is cognitive, a place of darkness where the imagination fails. And because it fails, Thomas is led not to the unity he experiences in "Alive," but to alienation. At the end of the poem, he alludes to Michelangelo's Adam, his hand extended, waiting for a "reciprocating touch." But Thomas's arising impatience ("I/have lingered too long on/this threshold") will not allow him to wait indefinitely. We know from reading "Emerging" that "a promontory is a bare/place," and that "no God leans down/out of the air to take the hand/extended to him." Waiting is difficult when no response seems forthcoming. Perhaps, as Keats says in his letter to Benjamin Bailey, "the imagination may be compared to Adam's dream: he awoke and found it truth," but in the absence of imagination, the only "truth" nature reveals is a God who "demolishes." In "B.C.," Thomas writes that God "is the shape in the mist/on the mountain we would ascend/disintegrating as we compose it."<sup>26</sup> The subject of the verb "disintegrating" is intentionally ambiguous here; when imagination succeeds, God is "composed," and the "mist...disintegrat[es]"; when imagination fails, however, it is both God's image and the poet that "disintegrate."

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<sup>25</sup> R.S. Thomas, "Threshold," *Between Here and Now* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 110.

<sup>26</sup> R.S. Thomas, "B.C.," *Counterpoint*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1990), 15.

The fact that “Threshold” contradicts what Thomas says in “Alive” raises the question of inconsistency. In “Alive,” the earlier of the two poems, nature reveals God to the poet. In “Threshold,” which appears roughly six years later, nature is bereft of deity. Do these poems, then, suggest a loss of faith or an abandonment of the imagination? If not, how does one account for the incongruities? Can nature be both divine and bereft of deity?

Elaine Shepherd gives this question fair consideration in her chapter entitled “Landscape as Image” as she deals with Thomas’s poem, “The Minister.” She argues that just as Wordsworth and Tennyson can see nature, as it pertains to God, at quite opposite extremes, Thomas, in attempting “to explore all possible responses” to nature, must of necessity explore contradictory points of view. Her conclusion is that “these strategies serve to illustrate the problematic nature of landscape, and demonstrate how landscape can function as a metaphor for the problematic nature of God.”<sup>27</sup> Later, she attempts to “reconcile the differing points of view registered in this voice, and [find] the purpose of this inconsistency.”<sup>28</sup>

Shepherd is correct in saying that landscape is problematic for Thomas, especially as it represents a problematic God. Why, however, must we “reconcile” the poet’s different responses to such a problem? Thomas is attempting negative capability, entertaining incompatible notions in his head. To do so is always part of his wrestle with deity, and his poetry gains tension from such incongruity; conflict and inconsistency are important parts of his ethos. It seems to me that Thomas, rather than seeking to “explore all possible responses” to nature, is exploring *his* several responses to nature. Remember that Romanticism turns the eye inward; it forces the poet to explore himself, not a detached possibility. Thomas is not trying to “reconcile” conflicting points of view. Each of the minister’s points of view is valid, independent of the others. They may all exist within the minister, because they all exist within R.S. Thomas.

Such conflicts and paradoxes are consistent with the fluctuating nature of Thomas’s imagination. When the poet can quiet his mind, nature reflects God. When he cannot, imagination fails, and he feels alienated. Thomas expresses such imaginative failure in his poem “Coleridge”:

And at the tide’s retreat,  
When the vexed ocean camping far  
On the horizon filled the air  
With dull thunder, ominous and low,  
He felt his theories break and go  
In the small clouds about the sky,  
Whose nihilistic blue repelled  
The vain probing of his eye.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Elaine Shepherd, *R.S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence. Images of God Explored.* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), 50.

<sup>28</sup> Shepherd, *R.S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> R.S. Thomas, “Coleridge,” *Song at the Year’s Turning* (London: Hart-Davis, 1955), 100.

In this poem, nature is “nihilistic,” refusing to offer any evidence of the deity. Thomas again presents the problem of the variable imagination: even a poet like Coleridge, who believed, as Thomas does, that God’s creativity exists in, and is repeated by, the imaginative poet, could fail to find God’s reflection in the natural world. Indeed, according to Thomas, “the chief tragedy of [Coleridge’s] life [was] his loss of imagination, the creative power which enabled him to fashion things which come closer to the truth than [do] the common things of life.”<sup>30</sup>

Notice also that in “Coleridge,” nature is “nihilistic” when viewed “at the tide’s retreat.” References to the tide in Thomas’s poetry, as in Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” are often metaphors for fluctuating faith.

The waves run up the shore  
and fall back. I run  
up the approaches of God  
and fall back...  
Let despair be known  
as my ebb-tide; but let prayer  
have its springs, too, brimming...<sup>31</sup>

Faith, because it functions in the absence of proof, requires the existence of doubt. Though a colossal contradiction, both move tidally within the believer. With this in mind, Richard Griffiths observes that the development of Thomas’s personal faith is accompanied by a growth in doubt, and that part of Thomas’s strength as a poet comes from his “lack of that certainty that can distort faith,”<sup>32</sup> and Ned Thomas, in his insightful introduction to Thomas’s *Selected Prose*, points out how “amid all the commotion of conflicting responses which the poet discovers in himself, R.S. Thomas has found his subject, the source of his imaginative life; the eye. . . quietly concentrated.”<sup>33</sup> God has many metaphoric faces, and he can be as contradictory as “hawk and dove.”<sup>34</sup> Thomas seeks the Wordsworthian flood tide of “sweet sounds and harmonies,” but he must also face the requisite ebb tide, the “still, sad music of humanity.”<sup>35</sup> Still, even in the wake of imaginative failure, the possibility of success always brings Thomas back to nature. He is “made free/by the tide’s pendulum truth/that the heart that is low now/will be at the full tomorrow.”<sup>36</sup>

Though Thomas trusts his imagination to create an image of God, he would not argue that the burden of achieving an interaction with God rests exclusively on the poet. To argue that would be to ignore God’s agency, for “it is not merely the [imaginative] mind or yet the senses which bring reality before us,” but something beyond our grasp.<sup>37</sup> Thomas often sees God as intentionally elusive, but he also sees God as One that occasionally yields

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas, *Selected Prose*, 127.

<sup>31</sup> R.S. Thomas, “Tidal,” *Mass for Hard Times*, 43.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Griffiths. “R.S. Thomas and the Role of Poetry.” *Theology*. 100 (1997): 277.

<sup>33</sup> R.S. Thomas, *Selected Prose*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> R.S. Thomas, “After the Lecture,” *Not That He Brought Flowers* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 22.

<sup>35</sup> “Lines. Tintern Abbey,” *A Choice of Wordsworth’s Verse*.

<sup>36</sup> R.S. Thomas, “At the End,” *No Truce With the Furies* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1995), 42.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas, *Selected Prose*, 127.

to the imagination and to poetry. God can be “seduced” by writing<sup>38</sup> and “unmasked with much patience” by the quiet mind.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, in rare moments, God may be the silence-breaker, speaking to the poet through all of nature. Consider the poem “Suddenly”:

Suddenly after long silence  
he has become voluble.  
He addresses me from a myriad  
directions with the fluency  
of water, the articulateness  
of green leaves; and in the genes,  
too, the components  
of my existence. The rock,  
so long speechless, is the library  
of his poetry. He sings to me  
in the chain-saw, writes  
with the surgeon’s hand  
on the skin’s parchment messages  
of healing. The weather  
is his mind’s turbine  
driving the earth bulk round  
and around on its remedial  
journey. I have no need  
to despair; as at  
some second Pentecost  
of a Gentile, I listen to the things  
round me: weeds, stones, instruments,  
the machine itself, all  
speaking to me in the vernacular  
of the purposes of One who is.<sup>40</sup>

The silent God speaks! While the imagination still plays a key role, it is *God* who has become “voluble,” deciding to make His voice heard. God does not speak unless He desires to. He can be “seduced,” but He cannot be forced. We may say, then, that an imaginative unity with God involves both poetic effort and divine condescension.

Also notice that the imagination modifies the poet’s perception. Even “the machine”—Thomas’s term for mechanical encroachments on the land, desensitized thought processes, the evils of greed, and a world stripped of spirit—becomes part of God’s “vernacular” in this poem. The imagination, experiencing communion with God, accepts everything that God deals out, both good and bad, “in a vision of love and providence working with even the most unpromising material.”<sup>41</sup> Keats again, but this is also a Wordsworthian idea:

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas, “Soliloquy,” *Mass for Hard Times*, 30.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas, “The God,” *Mass for Hard Times*, 25.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas, *Later Poems*, 201.

<sup>41</sup> Grahame Davies. “Resident Aliens: R.S. Thomas and the Anti-Modern Movement.” *Welsh Writing in English* 7 (2001): 69.

The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,  
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light  
Were all the workings of one mind, the features  
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;  
Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
The types and symbols of Eternity,  
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.<sup>42</sup>

Consequently, all things become poetic materials. In another Wordsworthian turn, Thomas determines that “[poetry’s] materials are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind.”<sup>43</sup> Thomas becomes just as willing to draw metaphors from molecules, electrons, or mathematical formulae as he is to build with wind, rock, or tree—everything becomes part of nature, generally defined. Some critics, though, have mistakenly seen the introduction of new metaphors for God as an abandonment of the old. Patrick Deane, for example, argues that “Thomas’s acknowledgement that an evergreen language is a thing of the past—if it ever existed—leads him to search for new avenues of communication with the absolute.”<sup>44</sup> Though Deane picks up on Thomas’s expansion of metaphor, the phrase “a thing of the past” is inaccurate. The changes in the “nature” of Thomas’s work are made in an attempt to *find* an “evergreen language,” not abandon it. We see this in a poem like “The God,”<sup>45</sup> where Thomas constructs the deity from various viewpoints. To poets, God is “made of rhyme and meter.” To artists, God hides “in wood and stone.” To scientists, He is “the agreed myth/of their equations.” We approach God through the metaphors we know, and Thomas is searching for the most effective.<sup>46</sup> And while he often explores the metaphoric capabilities of science and technology, Thomas always returns to images of the Welsh countryside, as filtered through imagination.

‘A repetition in time of the eternal  
I AM.’ Say it. Don’t be shy.  
Escape from your mortal cage  
in thought. Your migrations will never  
be over. Between two truths  
there is only the mind to fly with.  
Navigate by such stars as are not  
leaves falling from life’s  
deciduous tree, but spray from the fountain  
of the imagination, endlessly  
replenishing itself out of its own waters.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “Thirteen Book Prelude,” Book VI, 1804-6 version, printed in *A Choice of Wordsworth’s Verse*.

<sup>43</sup> Advertisement to 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, printed in Wu, *Romanticism: an Anthology*, 191.

<sup>44</sup> Patrick Deane, “The Unmanageable Bone: Language in R.S. Thomas’s Poetry,” *Renascence* vol. 42, no. 4 (Summer 1990): 213-236.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas, *Mass for Hard Times*, 25.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas also presents several ways we approach God metaphorically in “Mediations,” *Laboratories of the Spirit*, 17.

<sup>47</sup> R.S. Thomas, “A Thicket in Lleyn,” *Experimenting With an Amen* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 45.

The “two truths” mentioned in the poem are manifold, necessary opposites: faith and doubt, presence and absence, light and darkness, etc. The tree of life will seem “deciduous” as faith fluctuates, but the “fountain of the imagination” never permanently dries.

### A God of Pen

God’s image is mentioned in the Bible, but it is never literally described. In the first chapter of Revelation, for example, St. John writes, “His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire” (verse 14). *Like wool. As snow. As flame.* God’s biblical manifestations are consistently metaphorical: a cloud, a pillar of fire, a burning bush, a whirlwind, the form of a dove, etc. Thus, R.S. Thomas has asked, “How can anyone who is not a poet ever understand the gospels with their accumulation of metaphor?”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, much scripture is really a physical, verbal, even *poetic* representation of metaphoric thought. Thomas’s own poetry is no different. His physical words represent the metaphorical images of God that his imagination creates from natural elements. The “God of Grass” becomes “The God of Pen” when, in Coleridge’s terms, the poet’s secondary imagination echoes the primary.

As I mentioned previously, Thomas believes that metaphor is a “unifying power.” It is a vehicle for pursuing what St. Paul calls atonement, or “at-one-ment.”<sup>49</sup> Of course, the idea of unity exists in Romantic thought independent of any overt religious coloring, but for R.S. Thomas, unity with God is paramount. Under the poet’s hand, every hill can contain God; each river can speak His name. The mountains become “Eden’s garden, its gate open, fresh as it has always been, unsmudged by the world.”<sup>50</sup> One problem with focusing only on Thomas’s “bleak trek through darkness” is that his love of unity, which he finds when nature leads to God, is passed over. Yes, positive, even rapturous depictions of nature and God are rare for Thomas. However, it is precisely because “a rare bird is rare”<sup>51</sup> that it should hold our attention! God’s promise of unity, even if untenable, is a promise nonetheless. When Thomas succeeds imaginatively, his poetry expresses an “at-one-ment.” Thomas’s poem “The Moor” is an example of such unification.

It was like a church to me.  
I entered it on soft foot,  
Breath held like a cap in the hand.  
It was quiet.  
What God was there made himself felt,  
Not listened to, in clean colors  
That brought a moistening of the eye  
In movement of the wind over grass.

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<sup>48</sup> R.S. Thomas, “A Frame for Poetry,” *Selected Prose*, 69.

<sup>49</sup> Romans 5:10: “We also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.”

<sup>50</sup> R.S. Thomas, “The Mountains,” *Selected Prose*, 81.

<sup>51</sup> R.S. Thomas, “Sea-Watching,” *Laboratories of the Spirit*, 64.

There were no prayers said. But stillness  
 Of the heart's passions—that was praise  
 Enough; and the mind's cession  
 Of its kingdom. I walked on,  
 Simple and poor, while the air crumbled  
 And broke on me generously as bread.<sup>52</sup>

Imagination has led Thomas to a metaphoric union with God, and the poem captures this. This involves patience, but also an active imagination. The “cession of [the mind's] kingdom” must refer to the poet's reasoning intellect, not his imagination, for he cannot see God in the “colors” and “grass” without the aid of imagination and a metaphorical mind. Imagination lets Thomas see the air “break on [him] generous as bread,” and the bread in question is then “baked in the poet's oven.”<sup>53</sup>

As I noted earlier, when Thomas's resurgent impatience encroaches on his poetry, his poems become expressions of imaginative failure. It is also fair to say that the poems, at times, become compensations for that failure. Keats says, “We hate poetry that has a palpable design,”<sup>54</sup> yet for R.S. Thomas, the very palpability of poetry is often one of its “designs.” God is elusive, but poems can be read, handled, and spoken. Even though God's voice does not break silence, the poet's own voice can. It has been argued, by Richard Griffiths and others, that as the God of the “untenanted cross”<sup>55</sup> becomes Thomas's central subject, the poet begins not only to accept God's silence as inevitable, but also to embrace it as the best possibility for communicating with Him.<sup>56</sup> While I believe that Thomas does indeed accept silence in principle, I also conclude that his ability to *practice* silence is always transitory. Indeed, it is ironic that Thomas argues the need for silence by writing poems, which are intrinsically opposed to silence. Thomas surely writes for many reasons, but one of them is for the sound of the words. If he “ceases speaking, there is only the silence.”<sup>57</sup> When he verbally accepts God's silence, absence, and intangibility, Thomas actually *breaks* silence, *fills* absence, and *creates* something tangible. Consider the following passage from “The Belfry”:

Always,  
 Even in Winter in the cold  
 Of a stone church, on his knees  
 Someone is praying, whose prayers fall  
 Steadily through the hard spell  
 Of weather that is between God  
 And himself. Perhaps they are warm rain  
 That brings the sun and afterwards flowers

<sup>52</sup> R.S. Thomas, “The Moor,” *Pietà* (London: Hart-Davis, 1966), 24.

<sup>53</sup> R.S. Thomas, “The Small Country,” *Frequencies*, 19.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from John Keats to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 February 1818 (extract), printed in Wu, *Romanticism: an Anthology*, 1021.

<sup>55</sup> R.S. Thomas, “In Church,” *Pietà*, 44.

<sup>56</sup> Griffiths, “R.S. Thomas and the Role of Poetry,” 283.

<sup>57</sup> R.S. Thomas, “Senior,” *Between Here and Now*, 97.

On the raw graves and throbbing of bells.<sup>58</sup>

This poem puts an interesting spin on Isaiah 55, where the Lord compares His word to rain and snow that eventually bring forth flowers (verses 10-11). The biblical message is that God can be trusted. The believer should be patient and at peace because God's ways, though they may differ from man's, always work to the best ends.<sup>59</sup> It is interesting, however, that in Thomas's poem, we find the worshiper's words, not God's, bringing forth the flowers. Even if God's only speech is "the hard spell of weather," the words of the believer, offered in either prayer or poetry, may be enough to bring compensatory blossoms. In this context, the title of Thomas's ninth volume, Not That He Brought Flowers, takes on an interesting resonance.<sup>60</sup> Thomas's words, then, do not always echo the imaginative "at-one-ment" he desires, but they can fill the absence God has offered.

Words themselves deserve further discussion, as they become the threads that tie the poet's experiences—whether creative successes or imaginative misfires—to the poetry that rises from them. Thomas, though he is a master of metaphor, faces the constraints of presenting that metaphor with recalcitrant words. I mentioned earlier that Thomas can only create by ordering the finite matter he knows. Similarly, his poems—written to convey a sense of that creative process—are limited by his vocabulary. Thomas is aware of the seeming futility of such a task:

In the silence  
that is his chosen medium  
of communication and telling  
others about it  
in words. Is there no way  
not to be the sport  
of reason?...And astronaut  
on impossible journeys  
to the far side of the self  
I return with messages  
I cannot decipher.<sup>61</sup>

The fact that Thomas also tries to express what he feels are Welsh sentiments with English words only compounds the difficulty of such a task. In "Words and the Poet," he writes,

One of the problems of an Anglo-Welsh poet in any part of Welsh-speaking  
Wales is having to try to transpose the raw material of the imagination and

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<sup>58</sup> R.S. Thomas, "The Belfry," Pietà, 28.

<sup>59</sup> see Isaiah 55:8-12, where we find the passage "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord," as well as a promise that, after the rain, the believer will "go out with joy, and be led forth with peace."

<sup>60</sup> Thomas's poem "Waiting" also seems to echo Isaiah 55. In this poem, the poet waits "as at the end/of a hard winter/for one flower to open/on the mind's tree of thorns." A Wordsworthian "wise passiveness" is again important here. The resulting flower is a metaphor for God, growing "on the mind's tree"; see R.S. Thomas, "Waiting," Between Here and Now, 83

<sup>61</sup> R.S. Thomas, "The New Mariner," Between Here and Now, 99.

experience into the alien medium of English speech... I mention that as personally applicable.<sup>62</sup>

The transposition problem creates a paradox for Thomas: he needs words to shape imaginative experience, but the words belong to a foreign idiom. He fears that he does not know the words well enough to craft them into effective poems.

The idea that words are power is a major theme in Thomas's work. Also in "Words and the Poet," he asks,

Have you ever tried looking at a tree, a flower or bird without its name echoing somewhere within you? To recognise something is to pull on the rope which makes its name ring. There is the primitive belief that the knowledge of a man's name gave one power over him.<sup>63</sup>

Thomas believes that to name a thing is to know it, and to make it real; moreover, he presents the idea that linguistic knowledge gives one power over what is named. Tony Brown discusses this issue, pointing out how in his poetry "[Thomas] considers the idea that our reality is essentially one governed not by facts but by words, the names we impose on reality."<sup>64</sup> Things exist in the human mind once they are represented through language, and only when things have a name can they be "governed," or controlled.

There was a frontier  
I crossed whose passport  
was human speech. Looking back  
was to silence, to that  
wood of hands fumbling  
for the unseen thing. I  
named it and it was  
here. I held out words  
to them and they smelled  
them. Space gave, time was  
eroded. There was one being  
would not reply.<sup>65</sup>

When Thomas names something, it becomes real to him. The "passport" that allows him to break silence is "human speech"—words—poetry. God is "the one being" that will not "reply," and this because the poet cannot name Him. When named, invisible things come into focus and silent things receive voices, but God intentionally keeps His distance. He combats all that would ask his name.

But the hand wrestled with him. "Tell  
me your name," it cried, "and I will write it

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas, *Selected Prose*, 62.

<sup>63</sup> R.S. Thomas, *Selected Prose*, 52.

<sup>64</sup> Tony Brown, "Language, Poetry, and Silence," *The Welsh Connection*, ed. William Tydeman. (Llandysul: Gomer, 1986).

<sup>65</sup> R.S. Thomas, "One Way," *Between Here and Now*, 95.

in bright gold. Are there not deeds  
to be done, children to make, poems  
to be written? The world  
is without meaning, awaiting  
my coming. ' But God, feeling the nails  
in his side, the unnerving warmth  
of the contact, fought on in  
silence.<sup>66</sup>

The hand wrestling with God (an allusion to Genesis 32:24-30) is the hand of all mankind, but it is also Thomas's own hand. If he could learn the name of God, his poems would become "bright gold," and the world would have "meaning." But God fights Thomas at every turn, not only "in silence," but *with* silence as well. The Word<sup>67</sup> resists being described with words. He cannot be "crammed. . . between the boards of a black book."<sup>68</sup> Because Thomas does not know God's name, he is at a disadvantage in the metaphoric wrestling match; thus, he has no authority to "cage" God within the confines of a poem.<sup>69</sup> As Vidala Herman has argued, "the finite, of which language is a part, cannot either capture or contain the Infinite, and is not to be identified with it,"<sup>70</sup> so unless God reveals a name outside of the dictionary, He can remain outside the poet's borders. The following is from "The Gap":

He leaned  
over and looked in the dictionary  
they used. There was the blank still  
by his name of the same  
order as the territory  
between them, the verbal hunger  
for the thing in itself. And the darkness  
that is god's blood swelled  
in him, and he let it  
to make the sign in the space  
on the page, that is in all languages  
and none; that is the grammarian's  
torment and the mystery  
at the cell's core, and the equation

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<sup>66</sup> R.S. Thomas, "The Hand" *Laboratories of the Spirit*, 2.

<sup>67</sup> John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Also see "R.S. Thomas: Priest and Poet," 51, 54. In the interview, Thomas says that John's terminology is unfortunate because "we never heard Christ speak."

<sup>68</sup> R.S. Thomas, "A Welsh Testament," *Tares* (London: Hart-Davis, 1961), 39.

<sup>69</sup> See R.S. Thomas, "The White Tiger," *Frequencies*, 45: "a body too huge/and majestic for the cage in which/it had been put...as you can imagine that/God breathes within the confines/of our definition of him."

<sup>70</sup> Vidala Herman, "R.S. Thomas's Poetry of the Church of Wales." *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R.S. Thomas*. Ed. William V. Davis. (Fayetteville: Arkansas UP, 1993), 142. By way of distinction, there is a difference between *mirroring* the Infinite (Blake's idea) and *containing* the Infinite. Thomas often speaks of God's "reflection" and His "shadow," which seems to fall in line with Blake's premise, but while God may reveal Himself through nature, he is never "caged" in its "confines." Indeed, He is frequently like an electron—constantly moving, already gone when detectable—so that what the poet sees in nature are often divine residues. The title of Thomas's posthumous volume, *Residues*, is interesting when considered in this light.

that will not come out, and is  
the narrowness that we stare  
over into the eternal  
silence that is the repose of God.<sup>71</sup>

Poets, as “the supreme manipulator[s] of metaphor,” are empowered by words, but again, because God refuses to be named, calculated, or analyzed, he remains free of the poet’s linguistic dominion. Even if the primary imagination is undistracted and able to see God in nature, the poet remains unable to render that experience with words because he lacks a divine vocabulary.

A biblical example of linguistic authority occurs in Genesis. After God gives Adam dominion over the animals, he allows Adam to give them names. Thus, the animals become real to Adam because he has a part in their linguistic creation, and his naming them establishes his authority over them.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, it is words, inadequate as they are, that allow Thomas to at least attempt a linguistic construction of God—to give God a name—and his desire to do so keeps him coming back to the page. While trying to “name/what [is] not there” often feels like adultery of the mind,<sup>73</sup> the verbalization of his faith, doubt, and fear allows Thomas to understand them and attempt to reconcile them. Even if he fails to achieve verbal dominion over God, he may achieve an understanding of his feelings about God.

Still, coming to terms with feelings does not necessarily change them. Thomas may accept his plight on some level, but he is still confronted with frequent frustration, disillusionment, disappointment, even pain. When both imagination and words fail the poet, he has nothing left with which to confront God.

You have no name.  
We have wrestled with you all  
day, and now night approaches,  
the darkness from which we emerged  
seeking; and anonymous  
you withdraw, leaving us nursing  
our bruises, our dislocations.

For the failure of language  
there is no redress. The physicists  
tell us your size, the chemists  
the ingredients of your  
thinking. But who you are  
does not appear, nor why  
on the innocent marches  
of vocabulary you should choose  
to engage us, belabouring us

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<sup>71</sup> R.S. Thomas, “The Gap,” *Frequencies*, 7.

<sup>72</sup> see Genesis 1:28, 2:19.

<sup>73</sup> See R.S. Thomas, “Code,” *Between Here and Now*, 98.

with your silence. We die, we die  
with the knowledge that your resistance  
is endless at the frontier of the great poem.<sup>74</sup>

The poet seeks God, but God again resists being described, and “combat” takes place on a linguistic battlefield. Thomas alludes to the 32<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Genesis, where Jacob wrestles a “man” and overcomes him, then demands to be blessed by him before letting go. This blessing comes in the form of a new name—Israel. Less commonly spoken of is what follows this blessing, an exchange to which Thomas also alludes in “The Combat.” Immediately after receiving his new name, Jacob asks to know the name of the “man” who gave it to him. There is no record of a direct answer, but because of the answer, Jacob names the place “Peniel,” meaning “the face of God.” Thomas suggests that God has revealed his name to Jacob, who here becomes a type of the poet. Jacob’s success is precisely what Thomas is after. He, like Jacob, would like to be able to say, “I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved” (verse 30).

To wrestle with Jacob, then, God must make physical contact, and this is the very contact Thomas craves. In Thomas’s poems, however, God finds such contact undesirable, and, ironically, it is the *lack* of contact with God that leaves the poet “bruised” and “dislocated.” Thomas wants to hear the voice of God, to see him “face to face,” but he is often stung when he intrudes on holy ground. “A God’s words/are for their own sake; we hear/at our peril.”<sup>75</sup> God’s silence is both a weapon and a buffer, and because He is just outside the “frontier” of linguistic expression, he remains beyond “the frontier of the great poem” that Thomas would like to write. If the poem is a way to come to terms with God through the pen, then the irony of lacking words becomes all the more painful. A poem is tangible. It can be read or spoken, handled or heard. But without words, it cannot be made, nor can it ever echo imaginative experience.

And so we come to the question of *why*. Why does Thomas attempt to describe the indescribable God when it is so frequently a painful process? One answer is that even if Thomas comes away bruised after a bout with God, at least he has felt God’s metaphorical hand striking him. Thomas’s God is usually *deus absconditus*, but by confronting Him with words, Thomas brings God into his poetic presence. During Jacob’s “wrestle” with God, God touches his thigh, leaving an indentation. Even if this causes Jacob to limp, at least he can temper the pain of his wounded thigh with a corporeal knowledge of the hand that hollowed it. Thomas laments such pain, but he would not abolish it from his memory. To do so would cheapen the moments of imaginative communion he sometimes experiences. As Wordsworth says in “The Prelude,”

all  
The terrors, pains, and early miseries,  
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused  
Within my mind, should e’er have borne a part,  
And that a needful part, in making up  
The calm existence, that is mine when I

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<sup>74</sup> R.S. Thomas, “The Combat,” *Laboratories of the Spirit*, 43.

<sup>75</sup> R.S. Thomas, “Shadows,” *Frequencies*, 25.

Am worthy of myself!<sup>76</sup>

It should be mentioned as well that Thomas's motivation for writing poetry is not entirely selfish. He also writes in the role of metaphorical mediator. As J. Hillis Miller points out, the poet's role has traditionally been a spiritual one as it allows him or her to participate in the acts of creation and communion:

Created signs were not merely signs pointing to something which remained off at a distance, separated from them. The Eucharist was the archetype of the divine analogy whereby created things participated in the supernatural reality they signified. Poetry in turn was, in one way or another, modeled on sacramental or scriptural language. The words of the poem incarnated the things they named, just as the words of the Mass shared in the transformation they evoked. The symbols and metaphors of poetry were no mere inventions of the poets. They were borrowed from the divine analogies of nature. Poetry was meaningful in the same way as nature itself—by a communion of the verbal symbols with the reality they named.<sup>77</sup>

Thomas is very aware of the ways the poetry and sacraments are related. In the Penguin Book of Religious Verse introduction I mentioned earlier, he argues that the world needs poets and poetry. He argues that by exercising the imagination, a poet "forces the reader to do the same." The role of the *bardd* in the Welsh tradition involves being a spokesperson for the community. For Thomas, this also becomes a priestly role as he makes intercession, mediating for those that lack his gift for metaphor.

My work as a poet has to do with the presentation of imaginative truth. Christianity also seems to me to be a presentation of imaginative truth... As a priest I am committed to the ministry of the word and the ministry of the sacraments. Well, word is metaphor, language is sacrament, sacrament is language, the combination is perfectly simple.<sup>78</sup>

What more could Thomas do, one might ask, for a people who are spiritually starved, than to offer them poems that show his own struggles with deity? Perhaps someone else may find, within his expressions of suffering, something with which to identify. After all, to worship God together is not always to share joy. St. Paul commands the Galatians: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). While present-day Christians have all but removed the element of suffering from their worship services, the *via negativa*, which includes elements of darkness and suffering, is a valid form of worship. On this subject, the theologian Matthew Fox writes:

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<sup>76</sup> Wordsworth, "Fourteen-Book Prelude," Book I, lines 344-51, printed in Thomas, ed. A Choice of Wordsworth's Verse. In choosing excerpts from "The Prelude" for inclusion in his Choice, Thomas begins with this section.

<sup>77</sup> J. Hillis Miller. The Disappearance of God. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1963), 3.

<sup>78</sup> "R.S. Thomas: Priest and Poet," 53.

So often people come to church covering up their suffering—all clean and dressed up with fancy ties, hats, and shoes. Where is the possibility that tears might soil one's pristine facial creams or cut through the masculine defenses of accomplishment and ego attainment? People who cannot share their cosmic pain cannot worship together. Worship is the emptying of all we have, and pain and suffering are deep within us all.<sup>79</sup>

Thomas may, at times, feel guilty offering the hungry only poetry for supper,<sup>80</sup> but this offering seems to be his pearl of greatest price.

Perhaps the best reason why Thomas writes poems, even as he is haunted by the memories of past imaginative failures, is that he is a believer. The fact that he continues to “engage” God, when he frequently comes away “bruised,” is evidence of a deep-rooted faith. There would be no combat if the poet accepted silence or gave up his belief. Prayer, as Thomas comes to realize, is about continuing to kneel in the face of adversity. Likewise, poetry is about continuing to search for evasive words. Impatience may cause imagination to fail, and words will often be inadequate, but Thomas's imagination is not static, and the possibility of success is inspiring. We have seen that Thomas experiences periodic successes, and such moments remind him that even when in the throws of imaginative dryness, he can pray for mental moisture.

He  
listened; after the weather of  
his asking, no still, small  
voice, only the parade  
of ghosts, casualties  
of his past intercessions. He  
held out his hands, cupped  
as though to receive blood, leaking  
from life's side. They  
remained dry, as his mouth  
did. But the prayer formed:  
Deliver me from the long drought  
of the mind. Let leaves  
from the deciduous Cross  
fall on us, washing  
us clean, turning our autumn  
to gold by the affluence of their fountain.<sup>81</sup>

Thomas continues to believe that somewhere beyond God's metaphoric manifestations, somewhere beyond the questions and sufferings, there is an actual God—inexplicably, even

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<sup>79</sup> Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 221.

<sup>80</sup> The title of Thomas's volume *Poetry for Supper* has several implications. One of them is the irony that exists in a priest who gives his people the Lord's supper, or the Sacramental emblems, yet in many ways feels more qualified to offer them poems.

<sup>81</sup> R.S. Thomas, “Prayer,” *Laboratories of the Spirit*, 10.

intentionally absent—but real, and one day He may permanently end “the long drought of the mind.” As St. Paul writes,

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I am known (1 Corinthians 15:12).