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## Imaginative Truth

R.S. Thomas at Eglwys-fach: Paradoxical Poet

NAGATA Yoshifumi

### Abstract

R.S. Thomas, a priest and poet, suffered from so much stress caused by complex human relationships, especially with parishioners who lost their faith, in his second parish, Eglwys-fach, Wales that he believed the reality is harsh and absurd. This led him to compose a lot of poetry involving his agony. He raised questions and doubts against not only the absurd reality but also God's existence. However there was no answer. Then he knelt down before the "untenanted," or empty, cross in his church by himself for the vigil to pray or query to God. "Untenanted" means Christ's absence on the Cross because he was deposited from the Cross and thus his absence proves his presence. So does God's absence. At last Thomas concluded that we could reach for God's realm, "truth," through "imagination" and called it "imaginative truth." He also said God revealed Himself through the medium of nature. So he left church and wandered in the wild nature to search for God or God's absence that proves His presence. This is paradox; but this paradoxical idea is made from his strong faith and his harsh experience in Wales.

### I.

The lives of Welsh farmers labouring on gaunt, wasted Welsh hills in his first parish, Manafon<sup>1</sup>, Mid Wales, had such a deep impression on Ronald Stuart Thomas (1913-2000), Welsh priest-poet, that they provided him with material for his poetic outpourings. However, he also found himself becoming frustrated with—what he saw as—the farmers' unsophisticated outlook and he soon found himself at odds with them in many ways. He envisaged a kind of his 'ideal' Wales—a small religious farming community inhibited by Welsh speaking civilians in a remote area—but Manafon farmers who were English monoglots did not have any interest in such visions at all. Therefore, after twelve long years in Manafon,

he jumped at the opportunity to move to the new parish of Eglwys-fach, West Wales. Since West Wales was known for its beautiful nature and its Welsh-speaking population in the midst of the heartlands of Wales<sup>2</sup>, Thomas looked forward to leaving his ecclesiastical post at Manafon, which he felt had become burdensome.

Eglwys-fach was, ostensibly, a kind of ideal parish for a Welsh-nationalist who had to patiently endure his vocation among unrefined, impious English-speaking farmers in Manafon. Yet Eglwys-fach offered little of difference; he soon realised that there was little purely Welsh about this area. Among the Welsh labourers and farmers, Thomas was to encounter many retired middle-class English people, sometimes termed 'life-refugees'. They could boast a higher education and possessed a wider experience of life than the farmers in Manafon, but they also evinced a depressing small-mindedness in their outlook. The inhabitants were losing their faith and arrogant enough to keep the vicar under control. However Thomas was there as a priest, nor merely an observer poet. Therefore he was often called upon to solve a growing number of minor problems, and, little by little, his daily routine gradually became taken over by these problems. Of course his vocation as a vicar was to help them. However he was also a poet who needed a certain amount of peace and quiet to become absorbed in meditation to create his poetry. These gradually-accumulating minor troubles became intractable to him, causing him not merely concern and worry appropriate to his responsibilities but also stress, and at times, a sense of despair.

This had consequences for his literature. Thomas turned to his poetry in order to express his growing disquiet and angst. This resulted in the creation of a very internalized and inward-looking poetic approach. His poetic voice became harsher, as his writing attempted to express what he felt was a sense of absurdity surrounding life in this new parish of Eglwys-fach.

However, while we listen to his bitter voices emerging from his poetry, we can see him searching for 'truth' or 'God' in the midst of this absurd reality. After he spent a considerable time on praying for God, he admitted no God replied to this prayer. But he never lost his faith. Nor did he stop searching for God; he prayed, tried unsuccessfully to listen to God speaking yet he forced himself to pray and wait God to reply to his pray. However God remained silent. He eventually deduced a conceptual approach that God exists, but He is absent—this subsequently leads to Thomas's idea of 'the silence of God'<sup>3</sup> or silent God.

## II. Village Losing Faith

Most of Thomas's poetry composed in Eglwys-fach is both harsh and dark. They are filled with his sense of oppressive frustration deriving from his sense of despair, a sense which underlies all his Eglwys-fach poetry. In some of them, which at times read as fathomless enigmas, Thomas seeks to reveal the absurdity of reality—and the more the reader explores, the more absurdity becomes apparent.

'Evans' (*PS*, 15) is a good example of some of his earlier Eglwys-fach poems, although it is actually based on his stark experience in Manafon. One evening the priest visited a poor, old farmer lying on his bed for years and gave him the sacrament of Communion, which, because of his illness and senility, he was not able to take. Instead of expressing gratitude, the farmer uttered deprecations, displaying envy and even cursing at his neighbours since he believed that he had less wealth than others. Leaving the bleak, comfortless house, Thomas "heard the laughter of the young people in the kitchen like the laughter of the devil himself."<sup>4</sup> There was neither blessing nor comfort. Thomas found himself in the darkness that "appalled" him and

It was the dark  
 Silting the veins of that sick man  
 I left stranded upon the vast  
 And lonely shore of his bleak bed.

Here Thomas uses "the dark" in not only literal but also metaphorical significance. This sense of metaphoric darkness that caused his restlessness and anxiety was not only the actual landscape but scenery in his mind's eye reflecting his "feeling of despair." In his earlier years in Manafon, he saw "a grey world, grey with despair" (*The Minister*) unfolded before his eyes. This 'grey' would denote the literal cloudy, glooming Welsh sky but surely also reflect his hopelessness and depression, a kind of metaphoric gloom. The world was severe and symbolised in grey, which is a neutral colour. However the reality he saw in Eglwys-fach surpasses even this; it shows the fathomless darkness of despair. No light can enter it. Thus he can get no relief. It is just irrational.

Although most of his poetry in Eglwys-fach is based on his actual experiences in Eglwys-fach and his former parish, Manafon, their harsh images also demonstrate Thomas's inner

tension. In other words, as Brian Morris mentions, his “subject is not a parish [itself] but the bare, inner landscape of atonement.”<sup>5</sup> As this harshness in outlook was growing and festering in his mind, it caused him deeper depression, which led to a state of despair. In such a state of mind Thomas would even interpret the cry of a baby as a “cry of despair” (‘Walter Llywarch’, *T*, 12). In one instance, in the midst of his daily ministration he notes a labourer’s “face pressed to the wind’s pane./ Staring with cold eyes: a country face/ Without beauty, yet with the land’s trace/ Of sadness, badness, madness”) (‘The Face’, *T*, 17). On another occasion, he meets “with a man/ Leading a horse, whose eyes declare:/ There is no God.” (‘Journey’, *PS*, 30). It seems apparent to Thomas that most of his parishioners, except a very few, had lost their religion. Thomas found himself at a loss in facing what seemed to him pervasive absurdity and spiritual darkness.

Of course it was his vocation to help those people and he had a mission as a parson “to thaw the darkness that had congealed/ About the hearts of” his parishioners with God’s graceful light (*The Minister*). There were souls to be saved, he used to say to himself. Yet they rejected his help; they joined the services but never listened to him preaching about God’s love. He was “left alone/ With no echoes to the amen.” (‘Service’, *P*, 36) He confessed the country clergies’ skulls “Ripening over so many prayers,/ Toppled into the same grave/ With oafs and yokels” although “they wrote/ On men’s hearts and in the minds/ Of young children sublime words/ Too soon forgotten.” (‘The Country Clergy’, *T*, 28) He feared that he himself would end up in the same condition, as spiritually bankrupt and devoid of purpose in his life. This appalling confession from the humble priest, “which few priests would dare to think,” forms a core of this poem, described by W. Moelwyn Merchant, as “passionately honest poem.”<sup>6</sup> Confronting this situation, he expresses in his direct manner, “I have seen land emptied of Godhead” (‘Earth’, *T*, 46). Thomas gives poetic utterance to a kind of despair at odds with his role as a priest, since a priest is supposed to provide spiritual succor.

One reason why he went on to write such harsh, dark poetry derives from Eglwys-fach itself, which lies along the west coastline of Wales. To the north, magnificent mountains, including Carder Idiris, can be seen, and in the west there is Ynys-hir, a moorland with rich wild oak trees and bogs which is maintained as a sanctuary for birds. In geographic terms, then, Eglwys-fach was superior to Manafon, a hollow valley in which the soil was so poor that it could not sustain many tall trees. Except for summer, sunshine was spare. Indeed Manafon was not an ideal location for Thomas, a passionate lover for nature. Furthermore, Manafon appeared to be less attractive to followers of Welsh nationalism and speakers of

Welsh; scarcely there were Welsh speaking residents. Deriving inspiration from figures like Saunders Lewis<sup>7</sup>, who claimed using the Welsh language was attributed to their true patriotism, Thomas dreamt of establishing an independent Welsh speaking farming community. Since the rate of Welsh speaking people in the West and North Wales was much higher than in the Mid or South Wales, there would have been expected to be more Welsh-speaking parishioners in Eglwys-fach.<sup>8</sup> It seemed to be a perfect place for him to live in before setting down there.

The reality was somewhat different from the dream. Eglwys-fach was as his wife Elsie, a distinguished painter at the time, stated, “a strange parish”<sup>9</sup>—there lived many congregations from English middle class. They involved retired tea planters and ex-army officers. They had “much education and experience of the civilized world” but also “mankind’s old weakness, such as snobbery, jealousy and love of money.” Although they had already retired and moved there to enjoy the rest of their lives, they still wanted to play important roles in this small village. So, while the vicar much younger than them was willing to be a spiritual leader, they “put more pressure on the vicar”<sup>10</sup> to bring him under their control than parishioners in Manafon. On top of that, two landowners divided the villagers into two groups. They opposed one another and they caused tiny troubles every day. Both sides needed the parson to solve these problems. This made for a more complex relationship than that which Thomas had encountered in the farming community in Manafon, and he was too sincere to become embroiled in these petty but many problems. If he had been experienced as his predecessor<sup>11</sup>, he could have conducted himself wisely. Yet he had to intermedicate them and tried unsuccessfully to somehow reconcile their differences. He was so involved that at times he attributed their constant discord to his own actions (“Daily I take their side/ In their quarrel, calling their faults/ Mine”) (“They”, *NF*, 39). Lots of these small troubles disturbed his daily routine. Since he preferred to punctually follow his daily routine involving contemplation both to pray to God and compose his poetry, he abhorred this disturbance to it. Instead of quiet contemplation and meditation he found himself lead to dilemma and frustration. As he was, in a sense, an aesthete, he could hardly endure this situation. So he wandered the countryside to have peace in his mind and to forget daily troubles, but he could not completely escape from them.<sup>12</sup>

At first, this parish and the parishioners did not become a subject for his poetry. On the other hand, with *hiraeth*—a kind of nostalgic feeling for Welsh people over the lost or departed which is tinged with grief—he looked back to his former parish, now too far to

return, and composed his poetry from his imagination. In 'Temptation of a Poet,' (*PS*, 14) he starkly regrets his past ministrations, declaring "the temptation is to go back./ To make tryst with the pale ghost/ Of an earlier self." He explains how his poetry was composed from his conversations with the farmers in Manafon and asks himself: "could the talk begin/ Where it left off?"—From this query he starts to "question." Once in Manafon, he composed his poetry from his daily act of seeing, or observation of, the farmers.<sup>13</sup> Yet now he puts "questions". He questions or doubts everything and this process became the progenitor of his poetry. Indeed he left much poetry containing, or even beginning with, questions or doubts.<sup>14</sup> Largely there is no answer given. Generally there remain only unanswered questions. Nevertheless, he does query; he does so to quest for a 'truth,' that he is looking for.

Yet it is a heavy burden to keep on asking unanswered queries and questing for truth. And 'Here' (*T*, 43) in *Eglwys-fach*, he cries out at last—

Is this where I was misled? ...  
Does no God hear when I pray?

In the poem there is no answer to Thomas, and by extension, therefore, no answer from God. Although he had a strong faith in God at that time, those continuous unanswered queries made him swing. He might not have swayed if he had had a intense sacred experience or even a long career in the ministry.<sup>15</sup> Yet he had not. Instead, he carried on questioning to God but no God answered to him and therefore he could get no relief. Thus the unanswered queries intensify the restless tension in his poetry.

### III. Approach to God

Thomas's questions or doubts reach their height in 'In Church', a poem placed close to the end of *Pieta*. The title reminds us of 'In a Country Church,' also put close to the very end of *Song at the Year's Turning*, his last collection in Manafon. R. S. Thomas seemed to carefully choose the order and arrangement of poems in each of his books<sup>16</sup>; both the cited poems are placed in the penultimate page, page 44. Not only this, the respective situations (one man kneeling down in his church), the time (midnight, or early morning after a vigil) and his vocation (he probably serves as a priest) correspond. Hence, it may be useful to compare these two poems. To begin with, let us look at the opening of each.

To one kneeling down no word came,  
 Only the wind's song, saddening the lips  
 Of the grave saints, rigid in glass; (In a Country Church')

Often I try  
 To analyse the quality  
 Of its silences. Is this where God hides  
 From my searching? (In Church')

The first aspect of note is the shift from the impersonal "one" in 'In a Country Church' to the self-reflective "I" of 'In Church.' If we consider the impersonal "one" as Thomas himself, it can be assumed that he objectively look at himself praying in the silence especially in 'In a Country Church.' Through this impersonal way by using "one", he successfully concealed his emotional turmoil, thus we just got impressed by dryness and stillness of this scene. By contrast, his choice to use "I" as the subject for 'In Church' seems to suggest he made his decision more directly to speak in his own voice and starkly confess his doubts. This can be seen as his declaration of his strong determination to confront his frustration or despair reflected in the dark; he made it apparent that it was the priest himself to have a doubt about God's existence. Thus although in both poems, the priest—Thomas himself—is kneeling down at the altar and praying to God in silence, we listen to his bitter query only in 'In Church' and we know his inward turmoil about God's existence: "Is this [the church] where God hides/ From my searching?"

If we consider the construction of the Manafon church which had a big stained glass inserted in the east wall just behind the altar where "one" prayed, we could presume it was the early morning that "one" kneeled down in the dark at least before the sunrise. Then the sun rose and a ray of the sunlight shone through the stained glass which had the image of the Crucifixion to him.

Was he balked by silence? He kneeled long  
 And saw love in a dark crown  
 Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree  
 Golden with fruit of a man's body. (In a Country Church')

“Was he balked by silence?” the poet asked and there was an answer: he “saw love in a dark crown/ Of thorns” in the stained glass “blazing.” In the poem, then, the poet enquired and the answer was “love.” It is presented as a message from Christ on the cross captured in the stained glass, symbolizing light<sup>17</sup>,—or, by extension, God who divided the light from the darkness. This is what he had expected for a long time and this message is taken to prove Christ’s presence within the poem.

Yet no answer can be found in ‘In Church.’ It is the late night after the service finished. The few but faithful congregation, mostly not English middle-class inhabitants but also Welsh poor farmers, left for their home. Now the vicar is left alone in the still darkness in the nave whose seats were literally painted black by the poet. He is preparing himself for the “vigil,” a pray throughout the night.—“I have stopped to listen,/ After the few people have gone, / To the air recomposing itself /For vigil.”

Every light or candle is turned off. The narrator silently kneels down in front of the altar on his own in the darkness. In the “vigil”, according to the Anglican Church, one prays to God and meditates on God’s works until the early morning when Christ’s resurrection was declared after His death on the Cross. Thomas here in the stillness of the “vigil” fixes his every question and doubt to the cross before the altar, as if he “hammers” each nail into the crucifixion.

There is no other sound  
 In the darkness but the sound of a man  
 Breathing, testing his faith  
 On emptiness, nailing his questions  
 One by one to an untenanted cross. (‘In Church’)

Now we are left to listen to the narrator (here Thomas objectively looks at himself in the third person again) harshly “Breathing” and silently throwing his numerous religious queries into the empty spaces behind the altar in vain. He feels there is no answer. On top of that he feels there is neither “love” nor relief. But there is the priest, knowing he would get no answer, who is kneeling down and “testing” whether his faith is true or not. This scene’s stillness is intensified by the absence of a main verb, thus the scene is rendered effectively much harsher than ‘In a Country Church’ where he could gain a message from God.

However his queries involve questions to or a doubt against “the hard ribs/ Of a body that



our prayers have failed/ To animate.” The “hard ribs of the body” is the ones of Christ, whom he wanted to “animate,” or to somehow re-enact his resurrection, through his prayers. Therefore he asks again and again whether all his prayers were in vain.

Nonetheless for the poet there is no discernible answer. No God speaks in answer to his supplications. However Thomas is reiteratively trying to get an answer, “testing his faith/ On emptiness.” And, at last, among these questions emerges the ultimate question; “Is this where God hides/ From my searching?” This realisation leads Thomas to what he calls “the silence of God,” the doubtful and skeptical idea; does this skeptical priest lack confidence in God’s existence from the bottom of his heart? We are made only to wonder whether he confesses he lost his faith.

Yet in the very last line of this poetry, there is a phrase we should notice: “untenanted cross.” “Untenanted” means the absence of someone who should be there—in this case, Christ himself. And thus this signifies “emptiness”; this is a Protestant’s cross. It differs from Catholic’s cross; Christ is not crucified on it. This symbolises Christ is deposited from the Cross after his own death. Therefore, as W. V. Davies suggests, the “untenanted” cross represents “the abiding *presence of Christ’s presence*, as tenant, for God.”<sup>18</sup> Shepherd also points out, “In this emptiness, this silence, this absence, the narrator implies, God dwells; the air becomes a metaphor for God, but in so doing it ceases to be empty, silent absence.”<sup>19</sup> Here emerges the definitive paradox; Christ’s *absence* conversely proves the *presence* of Christ Himself and, by extension, God. Feeling himself surrounded by the silence symbolising God, the narrator or Thomas, at least, did not lose his faith. He still waits for God to speak even if God does not respond to his prayers at all; no other’s faith is stronger than his. And “untenanted cross” reminds us of a poem, ‘Pieta’

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

‘Pieta’ is a religious picture or sculpture depicting Mary cradling Christ who has been taken down from the Cross after Crucifixion. As W. M. Merchant points out, Thomas’s

poem of the same name is simple but the surroundings are ambiguous; he asks, "Where? In Wales or Israel?"<sup>20</sup> Perhaps both Mid-Wales hills and the hill of Calvary were merged into this one scenery, which was successfully made distinctive. Thus it can be said Thomas does not refer to a specific painting. But why does he refer to paintings? He possibly believes there are the space between us and God and that it is to see God's eternity to stare at a painting holding a scene that will never change. Thus observing paintings is one of a few ways for us to reach out to God beyond the time and the space. As J. D. McClatchy mentioned in his essay, "Only such an image could give us that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits, that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the greatest works of art."<sup>21</sup> Therefore Thomas tries to get a glimpse of the Infinite existing far beyond this finite world through this simple poem. And through the simplest style of the poem he depicts the original, or universal, scenery of 'Pieta'. Here the capital "C" of "The tall Cross/ Sombre" implies the original Cross on which Christ was crucified. In a sense, through this poem human beings can go beyond this world, where they have a glimpse of the primary moment only belonging to God and a momentary lapse turns into the infinite. Thus reading this poem means paradoxically to observe God's eternity. This moment shares the same moment the Protestant's cross symbolises. Thomas most probably stares at Calvary in his mind's eye through his meditation in the "vigil," gazing at the Protestant's cross in his church.

The meditation of Christianity is to imagine the scenes of the Bible. And the imagination is to make a scene visible in one's mind by linguistic representation. As Shepherd points out, "Language is the means by which the human searches out God"<sup>22</sup> so language can bridge between human beings and God. Hence the imagination is just the same with meditation in which one imagines a religious scenery through language. In his 1972 interview, Thomas made a remarkable statement about the imagination.

My work as a poet has to deal with the presentation of imaginative truth. Christianity also seems to me to be a presentation of imaginative truth. ... I am using the word imagination in its Coleridgean sense, which is the highest means known to the human psyche of getting into contact with the ultimate reality; imaginative truth is the most immediate way of presenting ultimate reality to a human being. ... The ultimate reality is what we call God ...<sup>23</sup>

Here he invokes Coleridge who argues the concepts of the imagination can be divided into

“the primary and the second imagination.” Coleridge further asserts the human being has ability to perceive God through “the primary imagination” and that the second imagination allows us to unite with God. Thus, as Robert Barth puts it, “[t]he very act of imagination ... is for Coleridge itself a religious act.”<sup>24</sup> Thomas remarkably asserts in the introduction to his selection of George Herbert’s poetry that one can create poetry through the act of imagination which is the “quarrel with himself” and eventually “with God.”<sup>25</sup> So his definitions of imagination lie at both the core of poetry and Christianity and also his vocation as a poet or a vicar is “to deal with the presentation of *imaginative truth*.” This “imaginative truth” is just a paradox; a mental act only in one’s mind (“imaginative”) is combined with the ultimate reality (“truth”). The reason why he coordinated them may presumably attribute to influence of Kierkegaard on him; it is well-known Thomas often referred to Kierkegaard, the Danish existentialist, whose journal entry number 1338 said, “The imagination is what providence uses in order to get men into reality, into existence ...”<sup>26</sup> and this Kierkegaardian “reality” is what Thomas calls “truth.” Furthermore Thomas explains that “imagination” is a spiritual activity without any physical acts and one can reach for the infinite realm of God beyond this finite world only through it as the medium. He also refers imagination to a “man’s capacity to create figures and symbols which convey the truth to him in a more direct manner than could plain colourless facts” and explains “one example of this strange power words have is myth.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore it is the “myth” that can convey to us “the truth.” According to Thomas, while mythological stories have been retold for centuries, their excesses have been removed and, consequently, only substance of them remains. Thus, in a sense, the myths can become simpler than any other story and in other words, they are universal. This poem, ‘Pieta,’ which has the simplest structure and style shares this universality. Furthermore he argues in an introduction to his anthology of religious poetry that a poet can lift his readers from this world closer to the ultimate reality through his poetry depicting mythological episodes or primary scenes.<sup>28</sup> Thus we can say Thomas aimed that he and his readers could reach for “truth” through ‘Pieta,’ the simplest poem.

But in Thomas’s vision no God appears. Nor can God be heard. He is ‘absent.’ –Yet being ‘absent’ does not mean to vanish; it’s not inexistence. It does, however, mean to hide from one’s eyes or one’s “searching”. He searches for God but God “hides.” And if Christ’s absence on the cross proves the presence as we saw in ‘In Church’, thus God’s absence attest God’s presence. And Thomas believes the untenanted cross in his church is the nearest way to the “tall Cross/ Sombre, untenanted” which leads him to the infinite realm of God. He

believes, and prays. And through his numerous silent prayers, he learns ‘the silence of God.’<sup>3</sup>

#### IV. Glimpses of God

*Not That He Brought Flowers* (1969), his final collection of poetry in Eglwys-fach<sup>29</sup> was severely criticized: “... the book’s import has no positive religious stance. ... By the end of *Not That He Brought Flowers* there is a mixture of distressing self-examination, at times an inner sense of torment, and boredom.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, no other collection of his poetry reflects Thomas’s harsher, darker mood than this collection. In a sense, it is a collection of only his negative aspects. Pressures from his English parishioners and unsuccessful quest for God led him to his deep distress and agony. Thence it follows that he is exhausted from everything. Take ‘Kneeling’ (*NT*, 32). It has the same subject with ‘In a Country Church’ and ‘In Church’—a man (a narrator or Thomas himself) praying in a church— but reflects a greater negativity than these two poems; he patiently kneels down before the wooden altar and he eventually expresses “The meaning is in the waiting” faintly. Putting more emphasis on activities to pray and wait for an answer rather than the answer itself, Thomas justifies his unanswered queries or doubts. He confesses that his days go on like this. No question was answered nor was problem solved. He has to withstand these reiterant tedious days, suffering from distress.

However sometimes the unexpected happens only in a moment; God gives Thomas a glimpse of Himself through nature as a medium. Looking out unintentionally from ‘The Small Window’ (*NT*, 38) of his church or rectory, he notices the nature shinning with eternal beauty—“In Wales, there are jewels/ To gather, but with the eye/ Only.” He feels the realm of God through this beauty. Again, he spoke about beauty of the nature in his 1972 interview:

... the glimpses of this eternal ultimate reality which one gets in Wales when the sun suddenly strikes through a gap in the clouds and falls on some small field and the trees around.<sup>31</sup>

The “eternal ultimate reality” is, as Ezra Pound puts it, the realm of God. It appears in nature in a moment. Although churches have been preserved as sacred places isolated from the outer-world since ancient times, Thomas, a priest and poet, dares to confess that God

never reveals Himself there and that he can feel the existence or know the signs of God only amid the wildness of nature. This bold confession from the humble but sincere poet is based on his controversial paradoxical principle; behind this lies the poet's own philosophy that God living in His realm sometimes appears to this world through nature. He says in the third person in his *Autobiographies*, "Thomas Aquinas believed that God revealed Himself according to the creature's ability to receive Him. If He did this to R.S., He chose to do so through the medium of the world of nature."<sup>32</sup>

Thus now he steps out of church into the wasted countryside of Wales. There in front of his eyes, through the succession of the "old boredom," this wasteland turns into "Eden, the still place" which they "hunger for" ('Again', *NT*, 41). Here not only positive images of God but also negative ones are presented in the last few poems of *NT*. He also had a glimpse of God in "an eagle" who, high above him, "Circled, shadowless as the God/ Who made that country and drinks its blood." ('Burgos', *NT*, 42) Eventually a peaceful idyllic scene is being suddenly unfolded before his eyes. At last he notices the image of Crucifixion among the shadows of a tree falling onto the field ('That', *NT*, 44).

The shadow of the tree falls  
 On our acres like a crucifixion,  
 With a bird singing in the branches  
 What its shrill species has always sung,  
 Hammering its notes home  
 One by one into our brief flesh.

This poem is remarkable because this is placed on the second last and page 44 of the volume as well as 'In a Country Church' and 'In Church.' 'That' certainly echoes those earlier poems, with slight differences. The narrator kneels—or stands—not inside of the church but on the field.<sup>33</sup> Instead of "love in a dark crown/ Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree/ Golden with fruit of a man's body" ('In a Country Church') he saw "a crucifixion" projected in "The shadow of the tree" on the field. Like the shadow images of Plato's Allegory of Cave, the Crucifixion casts its reflection onto this world.

A bird sings between boughs and leaves above the poet who listens to it. There is no dryness of 'In a Country Church' nor fathomless darkness of 'In Church' but peaceful "ultimate beauty" of the nature to heal him. And, according to him, since birds have existed for mil-

lions of years before man's birth, they have learnt the mysteries of the Earth as well as God's wisdoms from the ground and handed these intelligence down to their succeeding generations by singing on their notes.<sup>34</sup> But if these wisdoms are put into words, their meanings are entirely lost.<sup>35</sup> So the bird is "Hammering its notes home/ One by one into our brief flesh." It was the poet who was "nailing his questions/ One by one to untenanted cross" in 'In Church'. It is the bird now who gives answers to his questions by "nailing" God's wisdoms directly into his body. According to Richard Crook birds symbolise the Spirit of the Trinity.<sup>36</sup> Now Christ in the heaven casts his shadow onto the field. And a bird plays a role of the Spirit. The sing of God appears as the "ultimate beauty" among the nature. Here he might be able to feel the Trinity for a brief moment. However before long all of them—the Spirit, the image of Christ and the sign of God—disappear or hide from his eyes and his days of boredom returns. So he goes out of the church, stands under the wild sky and searches for birds, who knows the law of the earth or God's wisdom, as well as God in the vacant sky where His absence paradoxically proves His presence, suggesting he should head for 'The Place' (*NT*, 45) where "Watching them fly/ Is" his "business."

## V.

'The Place' is Aberdaron on the west tip of LLeyn Peninsula of North Wales, his next parish and the destination of his long pilgrimage of his life.<sup>37</sup> There he describes the church as 'Empty Church' and, after services, he was often seen wandering along the seashore where his church stood, as if he was meditating.

To leave the church and search for God in the fields is not only paradoxical but controversial for Orthodox believers. However he tried approaching God through the nature. And he believed that one could reach for God through his imagination and that God would reveal Himself through the nature. Hence it is not necessary to pray only inside the church; rather one should put himself/ herself in the midst of the fields. For him "It[the moor] was like a church to me./ ... What God was there made himself felt." ('The Moor', *P*, 24) We can see the same idea in his early poem 'Affinity' (*SY*, 25); here he introduces a Welsh hill farmer who "has the world for church, / And stand bare-headed in the woods' wide porch/ Morning and evening to hear God's choir/ Scatter their praises." This farmer is different from the one in *Eglwys-fach*; he has the power derived from the primitive ages to feel, hear and speak to God through nature. Consequently it can be said that he got this idea from the landscape

around the Manafon hills.

Behind this idea lies his spirit sincere and unyielding enough to admit he could not listen to God speak or speaking in the church, which no other priest dares to accept. In fact he has the belief more vigorous than any other. This intense faith led him to the God's absence showing the presence of Him, and to His silence. Because of this, subsequently he assures God's presence is shown by His absence: "It is the great absence/ that is like a presence, that compels/ me to address it without hope/ of a reply." ('The Absence', *Frequencies*, 48) And he also says "It is alive. It is you,/God.... the silence a/ process in the metabolism/of the being of love" ('Alive', *Laboratories of Spirit*, 51), asserting He exists and that His silence is just His love.

Absence shows presence. This is a paradox. Of course paradoxical theories are often controversial to the orthodoxies but in truth this finite world abounds with much contradiction, which we sometimes call absurdity. We are often tempted to avert ourselves from this fact and imagine someone –or God— would come to us to resolve it especially when we have to face the absurd reality. Yet Thomas did not; he was not feared to face it, admit the paradox and become paradoxical. This attitude of his makes him more mysterious and sometimes controversial than other writers in the 20th century. And, as we have seen so far, his paradoxical theories are made and raised from these three factors: his belief strong but sometimes swaying because of absurd reality putting him in frustration, the landscape of Welsh hills and harsh reality in Eglwys-fach. Without every one of them he could not be paradoxical. And his being paradoxical authenticates his vigorous belief.

#### notes

※This paper is based on my presentation at the 141st meeting of The Society of English Studies on 08, June, 2013 at Nihon University School of Dentistry, Tokyo, Japan.

1. R. S. Thomas's career as a poet is divided into three according to his parishes: Manafon years (1942–1954), Eglwys-fach years (1954–1967) and Aberdaron & later years (1967–2000).
2. West Wales is a fantastic location for nature lovers because of ideal beautiful coast facing the Irish Sea in the west and splendid mountains in the north. West Wales also retains lots of Welsh traditions. For instance, although the number of the Welsh speakers has been declining especially since the early 20th century, the Welsh language has been spoken by the majority of the population in the west. If we look at the percentage of the residents, aged three and over, who can speak Welsh,

the 1951 census reveals that, while the county of Powys, Mid Wales, has 29.6 percent of the residents, the county of Dyfed, West Wales, has 63.3 percent (source: *Census 1981 Welsh Language in Wales*, Table 4, p. 50). Before settling down to Eglwys-fach Thomas and his wife visited there to meet William Condry, a famous naturalist there. After that they enjoyed good friendship with him and he gave them an occasion of moving there.

3. R.S. Thomas, *Autobiographies*, translated by James Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1997), p. 107
4. *ibid.*, p. 63
5. Brian Morris, 'The Topography of R.S. Thomas', *Critical Writings on R. S. Thomas*, edited by Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: seren, 1992), p.122
6. W. Moelwyn Merchant, *R. S. Thomas*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press Cardiff, 1989), p. 29
7. Saunders Lewis (1893–1985) was a dramatist and poet, critic and regarded as the greatest figure in Welsh-language literature in the 20th century. He is also known for his Welsh patriotism. R.S. Thomas's ideal 'religious farming Welsh community' was derived from Lewis's idea. Close relationship between Saunders Lewis and R.S. Thomas is argued in Geoffrey Hill, "R.S. Thomas's Welsh Pastoral," *Echoes to the Amen: Essays After R.S. Thomas*, edited by Damian Walford Davies (Cardiff: University of Wales Press Cardiff, 2003) and Grahame Davies, "Resident Aliens: R.S. Thomas and the Anti-Modern", *Welsh Writing in English*, edited by Tony Brown (Aberystwyth: New Welsh Review LTD., Vol. 7: 2001–02).
8. In the West and North Wales, the number of Welsh speakers exceeds more than 60 percent of its population while the counterpart in the Mid Wales is much less. As Welsh nationalists have regarded the language as a symbol of their love for their country, Thomas, the Anglo-Welsh nationalist, had a strong desire to learn the Welsh language and move to a Welsh-speaking parish. See *Autobiographies*, pp. 62–64.
9. Byron Rogers, *The Man Who Went Into the West: The Life of R.S. Thomas* (London: Aurum, 2006), p. 190
10. R.S. Thomas, *Autobiographies*, pp. 64–65
11. *ibid.*, p. 64
12. *ibid.*, pp. 65–67
13. cf., John Powell Ward, *The Poetry of R.S. Thomas*, (Bridgend: seren, 1987–2001), pp. 18–19.
14. cf., "Who put that crease in your soul," 'Chapel Deacon' (*PS*, p. 17) / "Power, farmer? It was always yours." 'Power', (*PS*, p.37) / "Why must I write so?" 'Welsh' (*BT*, p. 15) / "I've been back. Just the same; / Does the period matter?" 'Encounter', (*BT*, p. 27) / "Move with the times? / I've done that all right." 'Movement' (*BT*, p. 35)



15. Before entering the ministration, as he confesses, Thomas was not a regular church-goer nor did he long for the career as a priest. However his mother who had been an orphan was brought up by an aunt and her husband, who was an Anglican priest. She came under his influence and had attachment to the Church. It was she who persuaded R. S. Thomas to take the holy orders when he was a secondary school student. cf., R.S. Thomas, *Autobiographies*, pp. 34–35
16. For instance, he left Wales, saying “All’s in vain” in ‘No Through Road’, the last poem of *Song at the Year’s Turning*. Then in the following ‘Boarder Blues’ which begins *Poetry for Supper*, he depicts himself returning to Wales.
17. cf., ‘When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” [John 8:12]
18. cf., W. V. Davies, *R.S. Thomas Poetry And Theology*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), p. 49
19. Elaine Shepherd, *R.S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996), p. 132
20. W. M. Merchant, *R.S. Thomas*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press Cardiff, 1989), p. 53
21. Ezra Pound, in *Poets on Painters: Essay in the Art of Painting by Twentieth Century Poets*, edited by J.D. McClatchy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)
22. Elaine Shepherd, *R.S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence*, p. 105
23. ‘R.S. Thomas: Priest and Poet’, a transcript of John Ormond’s film for B.B.C. Television, broadcast on April 2nd 1972, *Poetry Wales* (Llandybie: Christopher Davies Ltd, Spring 1972), pp. 53–54
24. J. Robert Barth, *Romanticism and Transcendence* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), p. 124
25. *A Choice of George Herbert’s Verse*, introduction and edited by R.S. Thomas (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1967), p. 12
26. *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, edited and translated by Alexander Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 519
27. R.S. Thomas, ‘Abercuawg’, *Selected Prose*, edited by Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: seren, 1995), p. 127
28. cf., “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 the primary imagination themselves, and so, in a way, nearer to the actual being of God....” (*The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, introduction and edited by R.S. Thomas, [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963], p. 8)
29. *Not That He Brought The Flowers* is a collection of his unpublished poetry during his Eglwys-fach years and so generally considered as a collection in that era.

30. J. P. Ward, *The Poetry of R.S. Thomas* (Bridgend: seren, 1987–2001), p. 63
31. 'R.S. Thomas: Priest and Poet', *Poetry Wales* (Swansea: Christopher Davies Ltd, Spring 1972), p. 55
32. R.S. Thomas, *Autobiographies*, p. 106
33. cf., "... as I left the road and walked into the moorland, it was very similar to entering a church, a quiet church." ('R.S. Thomas: Priest and Poet', *Poetry Wales*, [Swansea: Christopher Davies Ltd, Spring 1972], p. 51) See also John Barnie, "Was R.S. Thomas an Atheist Manque?", *Echoes to the Amen: Essays After R.S. Thomas*, edited by Damian Walford Davies, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2003), p. 60–75
34. cf., "A slow singer, but loading each phrase/  
With history's overtones, love, joy/  
And grief learned by his dark tribe/  
In other orchards and passed on/  
Instinctively" ('A Blackbird Singing', *PS*, 33)
35. cf., "When I speak, /  
Though it be you[God] who speak/  
Through me, something is lost" ('Kneeling')
36. Richard Cooke, 'Not Hurrying On' *RSThomas—the last country parson*, (<http://www.coventry.anglican.org/ministry/learning/resources/opt/-/item/87>), accessed on 15 March 2013
37. cf., "He [R.S. Thomas] had reached the destination of his own personal pilgrimage" (R.S. Thomas, *Autobiographies*, p. 77)

#### Selected Bibliography and Abbreviations of R.S. Thomas's Poetry

- Song at the Year's Turning* (London: Hart-Davis, 1955): [SY]  
*Poetry for Supper* (London: Hart-Davis, 1958): [PS]  
*Tares* (London: Hart-Davis, 1961): [T]  
*The Bread of Truth* (London: Hart-Davis, 1963): [BT]  
*Pieta* (London: Hart-Davis, 1966): [P]  
*Not That He Brought Flowers* (London: Hart-Davies, 1968): [NF]  
*Laboratories of the Spirit*, (London: Macmillan, 1975)  
*Frequencies*, (London: Macmillan, 1978)