



GWASG PRIFYSGOL CYMRU  
UNIVERSITY OF WALES PRESS



Open Library of Humanities

---

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF WELSH WRITING IN ENGLISH

---

## **'Ann heard Him speak, and Pantycelyn': The Unexpected Relationship between R. S. Thomas and the Calvinistic Methodists**

### **How to Cite:**

Nathan Llywelyn Munday, "'Ann heard Him speak, and Pantycelyn": The Unexpected Relationship between R. S. Thomas and the Calvinistic Methodists', *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English*, 5 (2018), 1, DOI: 10.16995/ijwwe.5.3

### **Published:**

January 2018

---

### **Peer Review:**

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of the *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English*, which is a journal of the University of Wales Press.

### **Copyright:**

© 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

### **Open Access:**

*International Journal of Welsh Writing in English* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

### **Digital Preservation:**

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

The University of Wales Press wishes to acknowledge the funding received from the Open Library of Humanities towards the cost of producing this open access journal.



---

# 'ANN HEARD HIM SPEAK, AND PANTYCELYN': THE UNEXPECTED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN R. S. THOMAS AND THE CALVINISTIC METHODISTS

Nathan Llywelyn Munday, Cardiff University  
and Aberystwyth University

---

## Abstract

---

This article explores the relationship between R. S. Thomas (1913–2000) and the Calvinistic Methodists, especially William Williams Pantycelyn (1717–91). It suggests that Thomas was drawing on Pantycelyn's *oeuvre* and imitating some of his famous images, especially the pilgrim who seeks after an experiential knowledge of God – a God who can be known and felt. Both writers use pilgrim personas to distance and ventriloquise themselves in their work, and yet the poems, in both *oeuvres*, are written directly out of their own spiritual quests. Their pilgrims travel through literal topographies before turning within: while Pantycelyn's speaker addresses his sin, Thomas's speakers' search for self slowly evolves into a quest for the *deus absconditus*.

Pantycelyn first appears as an iconic figure in the work of Thomas. However, soon enough, Thomas appears to envy the position and status of Pantycelyn as a 'national poet' as R.S. looks back at a lost Wales. In Bloomian terms, an *agon* (contest) develops between the strong precursor poet (Pantycelyn) and the contemporary poet (Thomas), who may be imagined as seeking to banish Pantycelyn – the eternal national poet – in order to clear imaginative space for himself.

**Keywords** Calvinistic Methodism; religious poetry; R. S. Thomas; William Williams Pantycelyn; Ann Griffiths; theology.

---

The unexpected relationship between R. S. Thomas (1913–2000)<sup>1</sup> and Calvinistic Methodism is an unfinished story.<sup>2</sup> Both Tony Brown and M. Wynn Thomas have shown how R. S. Thomas's imagination was

drawn to Ann Griffiths of Dolwar Fach (1776–1805).<sup>3</sup> She was both a ‘heroic’ Kierkegaardian figure and a Calvinistic Methodist at the same time. Brown argues that unlike other women, who are ‘explicitly seen [by R. S. Thomas] as threatening the balance of male selfhood’, Ann is an ‘authentic self’ achieving ‘spiritual insight’ whilst being ‘heroic and apart.’<sup>4</sup> Much has also been written on the importance of Søren Kierkegaard’s (1813–55) philosophy in Thomas’s work.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, in Thomas’s *oeuvre*, one might say that Kierkegaard and Ann appear like parental figures, holding R. S. Thomas’s hands over the depths of seventy thousand fathoms.<sup>6</sup>

However, R. S. Thomas’s relationship with William Williams Pantycelyn (1717–91), that ‘Welsh hymnodist par excellence’, is untold.<sup>7</sup> Pantycelyn, who was known as the *Per Ganiedydd* (the Pure Singer), was a Calvinistic Methodist poet who seemingly, according to R. S. Thomas, ‘heard Him [God] speak’ (*CP*, p. 43). Like that of Yeats, Pantycelyn’s is an ‘impenetrable mind’ (*CP*, p. 10), a figure whom Thomas does not presume to address. Nevertheless, Pantycelyn does briefly appear in *The Minister* (1953) and ‘Border Blues’ (1958), whilst his hymns echo throughout Thomas’s *oeuvre*. Whilst directly engaging with the figures of Ann and Kierkegaard, Thomas is also manifestly drawing on the work of Pantycelyn. Thomas’s poetic persona, whether subliminally or not, seems uncannily to imitate the Methodist *pererin* (pilgrim).<sup>8</sup>

Pantycelyn was the ‘third most important leader of the Welsh Methodist Revival.’<sup>9</sup> Trained as a physician, he soon became a healer of ‘spiritual ailments’ when he felt the call to Christian ministry in 1740.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that Pantycelyn never actually left the Church: he was not a *nonconformist* or *dissenter* in that sense. However, both he and Thomas were Anglican clergymen who did not conform to the Established Church.<sup>11</sup> Although Thomas disliked Protestant ‘Nonconformity’ with its watering down of the Eucharist, its creeds and its art-castrating piety,<sup>12</sup> he said that:

I’m sort of Non-Conformist without agreeing with the Non-Conformist way of worship . . . I like the sort of freedom, their emphasis on the Bible as being the . . . direct word of God to the individual, that you don’t need a priest to come between you and God. I like their disassociation from the Establishment in England.<sup>13</sup>

On the whole, Pantycelyn's 'Nonconformity' conforms to the description above: the emphasis on the individual, the centrality of the Word (the Bible) and the experiential dialogue which is possible between humanity and God. Although a powerful preacher, Seiat leader, organiser and catechiser, Pantycelyn's hymns remain his primary legacy, for he published over 850 in Welsh and 120 in English.<sup>14</sup> These hymns provided the Welsh with a means of articulating their religious experience. The language was vital to their successful reception: Carmarthenshire dialect mixed with the accompanying folk and ballad tunes appealed to the ordinary people, whilst the evangelical nature of the poetry articulated the personal, as well as the collective, revival experience in Wales (c.1735–90). Pantycelyn achieved national status which still resonates in Wales today as 'Bread of Heaven' continues to be sung in the Millennium Stadium during rugby internationals.<sup>15</sup>

Both Thomas and Pantycelyn were also poet/priest figures, whose dual occupations were unified in their presentation of imagined truth. Poetry, to them, was 'how the communication of religious experience best operated'.<sup>16</sup> Both poetry and religion use metaphor; for Thomas, religious language was a 'deciduous language'<sup>17</sup> that had multivalent meanings and could be renewed again and again.<sup>18</sup> The 'imaginative' is the crux of the creative act itself for it connects religion and poetry.<sup>19</sup> Thomas himself stated that:

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 as displayed in action.<sup>20</sup>

The role of the religious poet, according to Thomas, is imaginatively to present 'the ultimate reality'.<sup>21</sup> For Pantycelyn, 'the ultimate reality' was the gospel message which he had a duty to re-present. Pantycelyn's hymns sought to 'bring men nearer to God' even at the cost of aesthetic merit, a philosophy wholly different to Thomas's.<sup>22</sup>

Pantycelyn's hymnology made him a 'national poet', who 'gave form to the . . . dreams and aspirations [of the Welsh]', giving voice to and teaching the 'people'.<sup>23</sup> Pantycelyn spoke and wrote his poetry in the two languages of Wales, something that Thomas never really achieved. However, both poets experienced what has been called an art-creating 'tension of inbetweenness'.<sup>24</sup> For Pantycelyn, this was a spiritual

‘inbetweenness’, separating temporality and eternity, sin and righteousness, life and death, and especially, the division between him and his Saviour, that caused him to sing. For Thomas, it was, at least partly, the linguistic no-man’s land between Welsh and English that nurtured his poetic voice: ‘I complained once to Saunders [Lewis] about the tension of writing in one language and wanting to speak another and his reply was that out of such tensions art was born.’<sup>25</sup> Linguistic fragmentation reflected Thomas’s own crisis: there was ‘a painful awareness of his own strenuous existence *between* two cultures’, and therefore, two identities.<sup>26</sup> Thus M. Wynn Thomas suggests that: ‘[It was] this psychologically divided existence . . . that made Thomas not only a poet but a national poet.’<sup>27</sup> Whilst Pantycelyn’s hymns are sung in rugby matches, Thomas’s fractured identity produced a prophetic figure who became a kind of mouthpiece for the linguistically fractured nation.

What, then, is Calvinistic Methodism? First, it is important to note that it was an *experiential* form of religion, a way of life, rather than the Presbyterian denomination founded in 1811 (officially formed in 1823).<sup>28</sup> It was a product of the Evangelical Awakening in England and Wales (c.1730) with its main theological roots stretching all the way back to the European Reformation with its new, or rather re-discovered, New Testament Christianity whose beliefs were based on the three *solae* (principles – from Latin, *sola*, literally meaning ‘alone’): scripture over tradition (*Sola Scriptura*), faith over works (*sola fide*) and grace over merit (*sola gratia*).<sup>29</sup> Historians of Methodism have recently emphasised the importance of European events in its formation, such as the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which resulted in ‘The easing of religious tensions . . . [that] created space for alternative strains of popular spirituality to develop, pieties that tended to be more individualistic and experiential, stressing the cultivation of an inward religion of the heart.’<sup>30</sup> In Britain, one could hardly say that there was an ‘easing of religious tensions’. However, like in Europe, towards the end of the seventeenth century, there seems to have been an inward, experiential turn when it came to popular spiritualities.<sup>31</sup>

‘Experiential religion’ is a term that is usually associated with mysticism, which, in its original form, implied a ‘personal experience of God and reflection upon it’<sup>32</sup> – the concept (long attributed, erroneously, to Thomas Aquinas) of *cognitio dei experimentalis* (‘experiential knowledge of God’).<sup>33</sup> This experience is not only cerebral but involves the heart. Calvinistic Methodist theology was a:

Theology for the heart, giving expression to a mainline Calvinism within an experimental and practical framework. It drew heavily and heartily on earlier Puritanism, and yet shared unashamedly the individual pietism of contemporary (Arminian) Methodism. As such it confessed a biblical authority for matters of faith and conduct, and a Trinitarian, Protestant and evangelical faith.<sup>34</sup>

This 'personal experience of God' had its crux in an individual *evangelical* conversion experience:

'Methodism' was a term that came to be applied to people who had experienced in an individual sense the salvation from sin to be found in Christ. Usually this would be brought about through a Gospel preaching that was attended with much of the divine presence, bringing an awareness of spiritual and eternal realities. This involved personal accountability and guilt for sin, the realization of an eternal dimension to existence and destiny, an amazement at God's provision of forgiveness, reconciliation and acceptance to the believer in Jesus Christ.<sup>35</sup>

Early Welsh 'Methodists' were different from their English counterparts because they were generally Calvinistic in theology.<sup>36</sup> John Calvin (1509–64) emphasised the Sovereignty of God, Divine Predestination and Election of the Saints in the theology of Redemption.<sup>37</sup> This differs from Wesleyan Methodism which, theologically, tended towards being 'Arminian',<sup>38</sup> stressing humanity's free will in accepting or rejecting salvation – which also meant that an individual could fall from grace. 'Individual experience' and 'personal accountability' were fundamental in Calvinistic Methodist soteriology – the twin emphasis on God's grace and personal experience was 'nothing less than New Testament Christianity' for Pantycelyn.<sup>39</sup> Pantycelyn had himself experienced an evangelical conversion, the result of which is alluded to in his monumental semi-autobiographical work, *Theomemphus* (1764):

Dedwyddwch ddaeth o'r diwedd, y fath ddedwyddwch yw  
Nas cair mewn un creadur ag sydd tan nefoedd Duw;  
Maddeuant rhad o bechod, pob rhyw bechodau 'nghyd,  
Rhai ffaidd, mwya' aflan a glywad yn y byd.<sup>40</sup>

[Bliss came at last to Theo, its nature all sublime,  
 Not found in earthly creatures, nor in the realms of time;<sup>41</sup>  
 For sin a full forgiveness, for sins of deepest dye,<sup>42</sup>  
 A pardon freely given, by God who cannot lie.<sup>43</sup>]

For the Calvinistic Methodist, these subjective feelings of ‘Bliss’ were produced by apprehending biblical truths such as forgiveness of sin and the atoning nature of Christ’s blood. Pantycelyn experienced this himself around 1738 after hearing Howel Harris preach in Talgarth graveyard.<sup>44</sup>

A conversion experience, like Pantycelyn’s, marked a crucial point in the Methodist concept of pilgrimage.<sup>45</sup> After the Reformation, Protestant authors adopted the idea of Catholic pilgrimage and adapted it into Bible-based spiritual narratives whereby a Christian could be catechised doctrinally and encouraged spiritually.<sup>46</sup> Puritanism contributed to and developed this corpus of work by using allegorical settings to reflect Christian experience.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps the most famous and influential Puritan work that engaged with pilgrimage was John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) which established the pilgrim as the ultimate Puritan motif.<sup>48</sup> It did not take long for Stephen Hughes (1622–88), the ‘Apostle of Carmarthenshire’, to translate Bunyan’s work into Welsh as *Taith neu Siwrnai y Pererin* (1688). Pantycelyn inherited Bunyan’s pilgrim and realised that he could adapt the moral and interior characteristics of earlier pilgrim works within a Welsh context. Pantycelyn’s earlier hymns stylistically mirror the metaphysical pilgrimage:

Pe gwel’swn i cyn mynd i’m taith  
 Mor ddyfned yw ffordd Duw a’i waith,  
 Anobeithiaswn yn y man  
 Gyfodi o ddistryw byth i’r lan.

Ond pan y’m galwyd, fel Abraham,  
 Gwnes ufuddhau heb wybod pa’m;  
 Gan geisio gwel’ d dweithr DDUW,  
 Ond ffaelu ei ffeindio yn fy myw.<sup>49</sup>

[If I had seen before I had begun  
 How deep God’s way, his law, his work is done,

Complete despair and anguish I'd have felt  
No hope of reaching that shore of being content.

But when He called me, like Abraham of old,  
I heard his voice and did what I was told.  
I sought to see that stranger I called God,  
I could not find him at home, within or abroad.<sup>50]</sup>

The pilgrim-figure here realises that he cannot save himself or better his condition without grace. This is identical to the distressed pilgrim at the beginning of *The Pilgrim's Progress*: 'I looked, and saw him open the book, and read therein; and, as he read, he wept, and trembled; and, not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, "What shall I do?"'<sup>51</sup> The law's condemnation, in Pantycelyn's hymn, triggers off a quest to find or see God. Like Bunyan's Pilgrim, he goes via the cross before travelling on to the heavenly Canaan.

All of Pantycelyn's hymns about life's pilgrimage are linked to, or derive from, the ideas explored in his book-length poem *Theomemphus*. The poem is an extended sequence of quatrains which sees the transformation of 'Theomison' (literally, 'hater-of-God') into 'Theomemphus' ('seeker-after-God'), with the rest of the work documenting his pilgrimage and experiential dealings with God. The poem portrays an 'everyman' Christian, an individual to whom the reader might relate. Once converted, or 'regenerated', Theomemphus becomes the typical Methodist pilgrim who seeks after that direct, personal, redemptive engagement with God, but who is only able to find such an experience by God's grace.<sup>52</sup> That typical pilgrim seems to be reincarnated in much of Thomas's poetry in a somewhat different guise.

William V. Davis notes that the major theme that unifies R. S. Thomas's work is also a 'pilgrimage' or a 'theological journey'.<sup>53</sup> Thomas himself said in his autobiographical work, *Neb* ('No-One'), that:

Life is a pilgrimage, and if we have not succeeded in coming a little nearer to the truth, if we do not have a better comprehension of the nature of God before reaching the end of the journey, why was it that we started on the journey at all?<sup>54</sup>

As such, the purpose of life is to comprehend the 'nature of God'; the meaning is in the pilgrimage itself. Thomas seems to be drawing on an

amalgam of Calvinistic and Kierkegaardian ideas in the creation of his own poetical pilgrim. Pantycelyn's Welsh motif of pilgrimage established a tradition that sought after a personal interlocution with a 'felt' God, whilst Kierkegaard's three-staged '*stadia* of life' – 'the aesthetic', 'the ethical' and 'the religious'<sup>55</sup> – emphasised the journey of self toward a passionate, subjective involvement in faith.<sup>56</sup> This 'inward activity of discovering the truth for oneself',<sup>57</sup> meant that religious experience was relational and participatory which, generally speaking, conformed to Pantycelyn's outlook.<sup>58</sup>

Both Pantycelyn and Thomas can be imagined as being engaged in a poetic *agon* (contest). Both poets speak of a personal quest for a *cognitio dei experimentalis* – a God that can be both known and felt. They each use pilgrim personas to distance and ventriloquise themselves and yet the poems, in both *oeuvres*, are written directly out of their own spiritual quests. Their pilgrims travel through literal topographies before turning within; while Pantycelyn's speaker addresses his sin, Thomas's speakers' search for self slowly evolves into a quest for the *deus absconditus*. This article will now examine the beginning and end of their spiritual journeys. Pantycelyn first appears as an iconic figure in the work of Thomas: his portrait becomes an object of modification and reflection, hanging in a gallery of religious experientialists as Pantycelyn's portrait would have done on Welsh domestic walls. He is a Calvinistic Methodist figure whose position and status Thomas appears to envy as he looks back at a lost Wales.<sup>59</sup> An *agon* develops between, in Bloomian terms, the strong precursor poet (Pantycelyn) and the contemporary poet (Thomas), who may be imagined as seeking to banish Pantycelyn in order to clear imaginative space for himself.<sup>60</sup> The *agon* continues as Thomas's poetry takes a more scientific path – and yet even this has been foreshadowed in the work of his precursor. An extended reading of Thomas's poetry reveals how he never really lets go of Pantycelyn, whose haunting presence remains identifiable throughout Thomas's *oeuvre*.

### 'Our fathers knew Him'<sup>61</sup> – an experiential past

---

In *The Minister* (1953), R. S. Thomas contrasts two types of religion – the liberated spirituality to be found in nature and the restrictive, Nonconformist religion that is deaf to the 'sweet' 'strange theories' (*CP*,

p. 46) of nature's 'tunes' which 'John Calvin never heard' (*CP*, p. 46). The eponymous minister is Elias Morgan, whose name is an amalgamation of two 'big preachers':<sup>62</sup> John Elias (1774–1841), the so-called 'Pope of Anglesey', and Dafydd Morgan, Ysbyty Ystwyth (1814–83), the leading preacher of the 1859 revival. Thomas's Morgan briefly hears nature 'singing' (*CP*, p. 46) but he inures himself to the seductions of the non-human world so that when 'flowers bloomed beneath the window', he 'pulled them up; they were untidy' (*CP*, p. 47) – an action which symbolises his lifeless existence. To use Kierkegaard's metaphor of the map, the Minister admires the beauty and proportion of the map (theology) but he does not realise that one is meant to *use* the map to explore the territory (experiential religion).<sup>63</sup>

As a contrast to Morgan, the narrator of *The Minister* links Pantycelyn, Ann Griffiths and the great mid-seventeenth-century Puritan writer and mystic Morgan Llwyd (1619–59)<sup>64</sup> with the Kierkegaardian idea of what I described above as a passionate, subjective involvement in faith.<sup>65</sup> The poem's narrator daydreams in a free indirect style, mythologising and collecting religious experientialists in a semi-imagined Wales:<sup>66</sup>

O, but God is in the throat of a bird;  
Ann heard Him speak, and Pantycelyn.  
God is in the sound of the white water  
Falling at Cynfal. God is in the flowers  
Sprung at the feet of Olwen, and Melangell  
Felt His heart beating in the wild hare.  
Wales in fact is His peculiar home,  
Our fathers knew Him. (*CP*, p. 43)

This quasi-Pantheist, ecumenical portrait of God fuses Pantycelyn's emphasis on the experience of God with pagan myths, Catholic hagiography and the 'brittle' past (*CP*, p. 37) of Wales. The resulting vision of Wales is an early suggestion of Thomas's vision of Abercawg, a space representing 'an unique culture that gives us not only our identity but also our vision and values'.<sup>67</sup> This mythic portrayal of Wales is set in the natural world. It is in the natural world that the Imagination (in Romantic terms) becomes active – she is also a land where one would have been able to *experience* God. It is the active imagination that gives intuitions of the spiritual, 'ultimate reality'. The irony of Wales, or God's

‘peculiar home’ (*CP*, p. 43), stresses the fact that the present age has lost its sensitivity to imagination: its creative power has become a thing of the past.<sup>68</sup>

This idea of a lost Wales is repeated in Thomas’s ‘Drowning’ where the doomed Welsh are ‘uncomplaining’.<sup>69</sup> This poem figures Wales as a sinking ship, echoing the contextual events at Tryweryn, the drowned village of 1965.<sup>70</sup> This image of the last of the true Welsh clinging to the wreckage echoes, variously: the account of Acts 27 when Paul and the crew reach land safely on ‘parts of the ship’; the Kierkegaardian image of a believer trying to stay afloat over ‘seventy thousand fathoms’; and ‘those other / Castaways on a sea / Of grass’ (*CP*, p. 111) in the earlier poem ‘Those Others’.<sup>71</sup> The language, like the nation, ‘goes down with it’ (*WA*, p. 38). But this linguistic inundation seems to go hand in hand with religion’s demise, for the Welsh are ‘inhabitants of the parish and speakers / of the Welsh tongue’ (*WA*, p. 38) – a dual identity mark implying loss of religion as well as language. In ‘Welsh Testament’, God loses, or the people have forgotten, his ‘Welsh name’, or *Duw* (the name for God in Welsh) for ‘Even God *had* a Welsh name’ (*CP*, p. 117; my emphasis). Cramming God ‘Between the boards of a black book’ is like crucifying him all over again: the people lose the experience of God, whether he be in nature, in the sacrament or ‘nailed to the wall / Of a stone chapel’. Thomas points to the link between an experiential religion rooted in nature and the *natural* language, both of which have been lost or radically changed.

‘Border Blues’ (1958), another poem which alludes to Pantycelyn, documents this change. Saint Beuno disappears; the *Mabinogi*’s Olwen is metamorphosed into an urban, nylon-clad Brummie; the ‘wild hare’ that Melangell nurtured in *The Minister* is ‘shot at’; and finally, Pantycelyn is silenced, on the bus trip from Wales to see an English pantomime in Shrewsbury:<sup>72</sup>

Some of the old ones got sentimental,  
Singing Pantycelyn; but we soon drowned them;  
It’s funny, these new tunes are easy to learn. (*PS*, p. 10)

The politically pointed poetry proclaims that neither mythology nor God has a place in this new Wales. The nation of which Pantycelyn was a part is by now ‘putrefying’ (*CP*, p. 194) at the bottom of a ‘Reservoir’, whilst the gagging of the hymn singers represents a moral decay that

goes hand in hand with the demise of the Welsh language.<sup>73</sup> The 'land of song' learns new tunes (implying the Anglo-Welsh predicament), which results in hyphenated gaps, borders and the 'thin ghosts' (WA, p. 38) – alluding to 'Yr Iaith Fain', a colloquial term for English, literally meaning 'the thin language' – which appear in 'Drowning'. In these poems, then, Thomas uses Pantycelyn and Ann Griffiths to represent the literary and spiritual tradition that existed before the dual threat of the 'populist, bourgeois form of the religious nonconformity' and Anglicisation.<sup>74</sup>

In another poem, 'Ann Griffith', the speaker imagines a dialogue between God and Ann Griffiths. God says that 'these people [the Welsh] know me / only in the thin hymns of / the mind, in the arid sermons / and prayers', whilst her language is described as fat and rich, 'spring water' drawn 'from heart's wells' which becomes 'wine' upon 'her lips'.<sup>75</sup> Such experiential religion, emphasised as being natural or related to nature, produces rich verse. Thomas is portraying Ann like a Kierkegaardian hero. According to Brown:

This one female whom R. S. Thomas perceives not as a threat to the male but as achieving spiritual insight, an authentic self, is identified with the heroic star voyagers; she is seen in terms of the iconography of *masculine* selfhood, heroic and apart.<sup>76</sup>

Ann is seen as 'standing outside the social roles which women usually perform; she is neither sexual being nor domestic female, not lover, wife nor mother'.<sup>77</sup> Ann does not threaten Thomas. In 'Fugue for Ann Griffiths', the hymn-writer is depicted as a spirit in rapture, a pilgrim-soul, 'her face, [a] figure-head of a ship / outward bound' as the spirit of Wales (WA, p. 51) recalling the Dolanog carving of Ann like a nautical figurehead.<sup>78</sup> That is the same metaphorical Welsh ship which is battered into 'the last spars' in 'Drowning', where the 'speakers / of the Welsh tongue' have 'gone down with it': 'they were irreplaceable and forgettable' (WA, p. 38).

'Border Blues' ends with a line from Pantycelyn's hymn 'Dechrau Canu, Dechrau Canmol'.<sup>79</sup> This pilgrim hymn speaks of the arrival of the redeemed after their journeys' end. Thomas's poem places the famous line of the hymn within a quasi-nationalist context. The speakers ironically state that:

We are not English . . . *Ni bydd diwedd*  
*Byth ar sŵn y delyn aur.*  
 Though the strings are broken, and time sets  
 The barbed wire in their place,  
 The tune endures (*CP*, p. 72)

This section is set in a tavern. The hymn is sung, yet the singers do not really know the meaning of what they sing. The powerfully spiritual hymn of Pantycelyn is now just a popular (albeit communal) song. Perhaps the ellipsis, like a hyphen, asks whether Welshness and Wales can survive without its ‘Anglo’ other half. However, the statement ‘We are not English’ is actually a cancelling out of the ‘Anglo’ other half before turning wholly into Cymraeg. ‘Caf euraidd delyn yn fy llaw’ (‘I’ll have a golden harp in my hand’<sup>80</sup>) was Pantycelyn’s desire in Hymn V, but Thomas transforms that harp by replacing its strings with barbed wire (*GWP*, p. 8). Yet the ‘tune endures’, implying that the new Psalmist will have bloody fingers. This is the portrayal of the chosen people, the exiled Jews in Psalm 137 whose harps are silent, and the Welsh whose internal exile means that the songs of the past are no longer produced.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps the reason that Pantycelyn is mentioned only infrequently in Thomas’s poetry is that he has been re-incarnated into another Poet/Priest: R. S. Thomas himself, with his nationalist, barb-stringed harp.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, perhaps the golden harp – no longer for Thomas strictly appropriate in contemporary Wales – needed silencing in Thomas’s imagination in order for his own new song to be sung.<sup>83</sup> In ‘Deprivation’, Wales is portrayed as a ‘brittle / instrument laid on one side’ (*WA*, p. 49). Even when it is played, its music does not summon the mythological birds of Rhiannon because it is a ‘twanged accompaniment’ ‘by another’ people, speaking a foreign language (*WA*, p. 49).<sup>84</sup> The poem suggests that the Welsh harp needs new players; it needs re-tuning, even re-making, in order to praise or experience God in a new age.

Part of this re-tuning was the scientific turn in Thomas’s later poetry. Thomas-as-pilgrim must move on because language fails him in his quest for the *deus absconditus*. The absence of subjective, or felt, experiences of God gives birth to new ways of approaching the Deity in Thomas’s poetry. ‘So with wings pinned / and fuel rationed’, as in ‘Fugue for Ann Griffiths’ (*WA*, p. 55), the pilgrim puts ‘on speed’ in a new phase of pilgrimage which will now be expressed through the language of science.

## 'Come to me by numbers and figures'<sup>85</sup> – new pilgrimages

---

Thomas's pilgrim realised that language ultimately fails when seeking after a felt God. A new language is needed and Thomas began to utilise a newly scientific vocabulary in the 1970s. The quest after the 'ultimate reality' was one that he saw as being shared by both scientist and religious poet.<sup>86</sup> In 1990, Thomas stated that 'first-rank' scientists 'exercise a wonder at creation which is akin to religion' and that 'pure science and religion' are reconcilable.<sup>87</sup> He believed that a physicist should have some sort of 'mystical attitude' in attempting to discover the secrets of the universe.<sup>88</sup> At this point, according to John Pikoulis, 'Science [starts] spreading through [Thomas's] verse like a virus', while at the same time showing an increase in poetic experimentation and an evolving religious experientialism.<sup>89</sup>

Part of Thomas's encounter with science is a 'quarrel with technology' and the scientist.<sup>90</sup> Whilst *pure* science and religion were reconcilable in his mind, *applied* science, or (in his view) the misuse of science was not. Thomas created one of the most recurrent metaphors in his later poetry in order to articulate this problem: he called it 'the machine', a ghost from Heidegger's essay on technology.<sup>91</sup> This other 'god' that man has created was the embodiment of a de-humanising science that went wrong; it became that amoral creation which challenged the authority of the creator. Religion might be able to place 'its hand in' the hand of science and 'smile', but when the machine grasps religion's hand, as in 'Asking', the smile fades:<sup>92</sup>

Did I see religion,  
its hand in the machine's,  
trying to smile as the grip  
tightened? (EA, p. 51)

The machine remains a complex concept in Thomas's poetry. Sometimes it represents *applied* science; sometimes it serves as a picture of our relationship with God by appearing like a man or like God. Sometimes, as in 'Black Liturgies', the machine is a 'changeling' appearing like a 'grinning' alternative to Jesus Christ.<sup>93</sup> Davis suggests that the crux of the metaphor of the machine is 'that the machine is to man as man is to God':<sup>94</sup> it is the rebellious creation which can only be redeemed by accepting the authority and word of its creator. However, Thomas still

believed that the language of science might be analogous to religious language:

Science and technology are concerned with vital areas of man's concern, they are therefore taken seriously. So still is religion . . . We are becoming so conditioned by the scientific view of things that we are in danger of accepting as truth only an experiment that can be repeated; that is, accepting as true only that which can be proved. Whereas the use of imagination should remind us that we are surrounded by mystery.<sup>95</sup>

Thomas suggests that the scientist should at times adopt the approach of a religious poet, using imagination and accepting the limits of human understanding. He also suggests that the religious poet could benefit from approaching certain concepts with the mind of a scientist – experimenting, theorising whilst adopting an evolving language. According to John Barrie:

[Thomas] is not 'against' developments in science and technology in themselves, but he is against their misuse in a civilization based on greed and self-love. Science could even be the source of a kind of Kingdom of God on earth.<sup>96</sup>

But this 'Kingdom of God' could never be achieved if science was continually misused within civilisation. Marginalia in a book which was on Thomas's shelves (now in the R. S. Thomas Centre at Bangor) at the time of his death reveals his belief in the possible fusion between the languages of science and religion. In this volume – I. T. Ramsey's *Religion and Science* (1964) – the 'moral' scientist is discussed along with ideas of subjectivity and individual responsibility. Using the biblical story of King David and the Prophet Nathan, the author shows how one becomes aware of one's own subjectivity:

Nathan tells David a story which David understands – as a spectator – in terms of 'objects'. There are two men, the one rich, the other poor. The rich man had many flocks and herds, the poor man had nothing, except one little ewe lamb. Unexpected visitors arrive, and the rich man's wife is 'on the spot'. She spares to take of her husband's flock, for whatever reason we can only invent, and

sends to the poor man for his little lamb, etc. – a story perfectly coined in terms of objects. David understands it – he builds up the object picture, and he makes an impersonal judgement on it as though he were Mr Justice David sitting in the Queen's Bench Division. 'That man must surely die.' Here is something all very impersonal – scientific and legal. But then Nathan challenges David, 'Thou art the man,' and the penny drops – there is a disclosure indeed. David surveys his distinct perceptions – on the one hand the lamb, the two men, the guests and so on and, alongside this, the picture of Bathsheba, Uriah's death . . . and – he comes to himself. For the first time in that story he has 'self-knowledge'; he knows 'I'.<sup>97</sup>

David, who is initially a spectator, becomes aware of 'I' or acquires 'self-knowledge' when he is pointed at by Nathan's religiously phrased accusation of 'Thou art the man'.<sup>98</sup> When the story is applied to him, David metamorphoses from the objective spectator into the subject of the parable. 'Personality', the author argues, is a concept 'that can help bridge the yawning gulf in our civilization between the scientific and the moral' because it is a concept that 'is rooted in, and is, common to both types of discourses'.<sup>99</sup> Thomas writes under the story in his copy of *Religion and Science* 'Who is to act as Nathan to the scientist?', suggesting that science, or the scientist, needed that 'sharpening of the I' which Kierkegaard encouraged; perhaps Thomas believed that he could be a Nathan, a prophet-figure, who could bridge that 'yawning gulf' where the objective scientist had lost all sight of moral responsibility. Science may thus be, unexpectedly, a means of communicating with a twenty-first-century God or at least giving some insight into the mysterious nature of the universe.

One might think that R.S.'s turn to the language of science is a distinguishing mark of his modernity. Yet Pantycelyn had also turned to science as another step in his expanding experiential knowledge of God. In *Golwg ar Deyrnas Crist* ('A View of Christ's Kingdom', 1756, 1764),<sup>100</sup> Pantycelyn muses on the deity of Christ's person and kingdom as a reaction to the Deism of his age which maintained that human reason was adequate to achieve a knowledge of God. The poem articulates the limitations of scientific theory as well as emphasising the necessity of revealed religion.<sup>101</sup> The second chapter of the poem concentrates on Christ's lordship over creation whilst the footnoting

presents us with evidence of a poet engaging with contemporary scientific discourses.<sup>102</sup> The same scientific and geographical language was repeated in some of Pantycelyn's other works, the best example being a prose work of 1774 called *Aurora Borealis*.<sup>103</sup> The appearance of the Northern Lights in Carmarthenshire signified, for Pantycelyn, the Gospel's success in Wales and throughout the world.<sup>104</sup>

Both pilgrims, Pantycelyn and Thomas, have already looked within as well as without; they now gaze upwards like that figure in Thomas's poem 'Alive' who observes the 'sleepless conurbations / of the stars' (*LS*, p. 51). Both John Pikoulis and Patrick Crotty have drawn attention to the stars as a central *topos* in Thomas's *oeuvre*.<sup>105</sup> However, they fail to note that Thomas's pilgrim may be emulating an earlier, star-gazing, Methodist pilgrim – though Thomas, to use Bloomian terms, swerves away from his predecessor by abandoning conventional religious language, and in doing so, challenges Pantycelyn's view of God.

### **'Again your eyes lift upwards'<sup>106</sup> – the star-gazing pilgrim**

---

In the second chapter of *Golwg ar Deyrnas Crist*, Pantycelyn begins by looking at the stars:

Mae Duw yn haeddu cael ei ganmol a'i fawrhau yn y sêr a'u troadau,  
eu maint a'u pellter, eu goleuni a'u cyflymdra, eu harddwch a'u  
cysondeb, fil o weithiau ragor nag yw'r llyfr hwn yn ei gynnwys.  
(*GDC*, p. 32)

[God deserves to be praised and magnified in the stars and their courses, their magnitude and their remoteness, their light and their swiftness, their beauty and their harmony, a thousand times more than this book comprises.] (my translation)

Although Pantycelyn sees God's power as being mirrored in the stars, the description of their mystery could have been uttered by Thomas himself – albeit somewhat tinged by the spirit of Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* 206: 'The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.'<sup>107</sup> Ultimately, though, Thomas was not 'frightened' of space but saw it as another manifestation, or dwelling-place, of the *deus absconditus* for 'the darkness' implied His 'presence'.<sup>108</sup> Thomas's 'fast God' (*F*, p. 51) in

the poem 'Pilgrimages' is hinted at in Pantycelyn's quotation as well as in the distant God that Thomas experienced in so many of his earlier poems: 'eu maint a'u pellter' ('their magnitude and remoteness'); the stars' attributes mirror God's attributes. Pantycelyn then takes the reader on a journey into space itself:

Fel pe aem heibio'r lleuad i'r ehangder tenau, mawr  
I'r seren uwcha' welem oddi yma ar y llawr;  
Haul, lloer, a sêr, planedau fyth yn disgleirio fry,  
Ac awyr faith ymhellach fyddai yno i'n golwg ni. (*GDC*, p. 46)

[If past the moon we travell'd, through the ethereal space,  
To the remotest planet which from this earth we trace,  
Sun, moon and stars and planets still in the distance shine,  
And wide air yet more distant which no eye can define.<sup>109</sup>]

No human eye can define the entire galaxy. The next four or five stanzas trace God's superior and omniscient sight: 'From star to star though distant . . . / He can minutely trace.'<sup>110</sup> The poet articulates a wonder at a God who 'in a moment' could create 20,000 planets as well as the smallest grain of sand:

'R un peth i'r *Iah* tragwyddol sy â'r gallu yn ei law,  
I roddi bod mewn munud (a ddywedo fe a ddaw)  
I ugain mil o fydoedd sy'n cerdded yn eu rhod,  
Neu i un o'r tywod mana' a welodd neb erio'd. (*GDC*, p. 47)

[The same to *Jah* eternal, with His all-powerful hand  
To give birth in a moment (His word is a command)  
To twenty-thousand planets that tread the distant sky,  
As to create the smallest sand seen by mortal eye.<sup>111</sup>]

Pantycelyn uses the image of a telescope and imagines looking through the narrow end towards space with its stars, before looking through the other end and viewing the grains of sand on the floor. (In a footnote, Pantycelyn confirms the source of the imagery by referring to 'recent large telescopes, some of which are one hundred and twenty feet long.'<sup>112</sup>) Later in the poem Pantycelyn takes that image of the star-creating Christ who, as a willing Lord, humbled himself by coming down to the sands as a Saviour of humanity:

O! gariad heb ei gyfar! gras yn ymgrymu 'lawr,  
Er crëu sêr difesur, cofleidio llwch y llawr!  
Yn marw tros blant Adda ag eto oedd yn byw  
Yn wrthryfelwyr eon ymlaen yn erbyn Duw. (*GDC*, p. 54)

[O love without its equal, what condescending grace,  
That He who stars created yet should earth's dust embrace,  
To die for Adam's children who still defied the rod,  
And lived in bold rebellion against th' Almighty God.<sup>113</sup>]

Everything relates to, or illustrates, the grand narrative of redemption. The poet juxtaposes the stars with the grains of dust; their sheer contrast reminds him of Christ's humiliating experience. However, he does not stop there: the poet then combines the dual idea of dust (or sand) and stars which, in space, create shooting stars, a further manifestation or representation of the 'Light of the World':<sup>114</sup>

Chwi sêr, sy heibio ei gilydd yn 'hedeg fel y wawr,  
Mewn funud fach yn saethu goleuni o'r nen i lawr,  
Cyhoeddwch trwy holl natur, yn llawen nid yn drist,  
Mai'r hwn rodd bod ich gynta' a elwid Iesu Grist. (*GDC*, p. 56)

[Ye stars each other passing, expanding as the dawn,  
That in a moment shooting light from the heaven's down,  
Proclaim throughout all nature, and joyfully proclaim  
Him who first gave you being and Jesus Christ His name.<sup>115</sup>]

Having seen Christ throughout the stellar world, the poem then returns to the grand narrative of redemption by contrasting and applying natural phenomena with the great events of the pilgrim's soul. One stanza notes that the 'sons of Adam' are 'lower than the dust' (*GDC*, p. 53) but Christ, who is star-creator, embraces the dust (*GDC*, p. 54); all Methodists would have known that 'dust' was the stuff that humanity would be made from.<sup>116</sup> This symbolic part of the poem is accompanied in *Golwg ar Deyrnas Crist* by heavy footnoting linking Pantycelyn himself with figures such as William Derham (1657–1735), who similarly combined original scientific observations with theological discourses in works such as *Astro-Theology* (1714).<sup>117</sup> Similarly, Pantycelyn's use of the stars combines scientific observation with worship because the stars are the ultimate handiwork of God.

Pantycelyn also saw natural phenomena as primary evidence for an active God. Throughout the early 1770s, the Northern Lights were being seen in the southern parts of Britain.<sup>118</sup> Soon afterwards, Pantycelyn wrote his *Aurora Borealis* (1774), which begins by discussing the scientific theories surrounding the Northern Lights, mentioning 'sun beams', 'the new science of electricity', 'ether' and 'weather' as possible causes.<sup>119</sup> He then moves on to the cloudy and fiery pillar in Exodus and the Genesis rainbow, stating that the *Aurora* is another phenomenon given by God.<sup>120</sup> Natural phenomena such as this often inspired Methodist hymns and sermons.<sup>121</sup> On 16 May 1746, Howel Harris wrote in his diary: 'At midnight when I would see lightning in the sky or the Northern Lights, my soul would be ready to burst my body with joy being in hopes Christ was coming to judgement.'<sup>122</sup> When Williams saw the light he said that: 'As the Northern Lights spread across the sky, so also the Gospel in time will cover the Earth as well.'<sup>123</sup> In this context, we can see the Northern Lights clearly articulated in a selection of stanzas from Williams's Hymn LXXXIX:

O'er those gloomy hills of darkness  
Look, my soul, be still and gaze;  
All the promises do travail  
With a glorious day of grace.  
Blessed Jubil, &c.  
Let thy glorious morning dawn.

Kingdoms wide that sit in darkness,  
Let them have the glorious light,  
And from Eastern coast to Western  
May the morning chase the night,  
And Redemption, &c.  
Freely purchas'd, win the day.

May the glorious days approaching,  
From eternal darkness dawn,  
And the everlasting Gospel  
Spread abroad Thy holy Name.  
Thousand years, &c.  
Soon appear, make no delay.

... May thy sceptre, &c.  
Sway the enlightened world around. (*GWP*, p. 428)

The language of this hymn glows with the Northern Lights. The juxtaposition between dark and light throughout emphasises that Pantycelyn's pilgrim looks up and is reminded of the 'ultimate truth' or the Gospel message, for the darkened world had seen a great light.<sup>124</sup>

Like Pantycelyn, R. S. Thomas's later work sees the pilgrim figure evolve into an astronaut or a space-traveller – fundamentally, a figure looking up at the stars. This celestial journey can be seen in the poem 'Fugue for Ann Griffiths' which ends with the pilgrim blasting off in prayer that is portrayed like a kind of rocket. Before he takes off, science and religion meet face to face throughout the poem. The speaker muses on the environment and whether it affects the likelihood of experiencing God. The 'twentieth century sky' (*WA*, p. 50) could easily be mistaken for the 'peace / of the nineteenth' because the 'cables and pylons' lining the modern sky reflect the cable-like threads produced by a curiously arachnid Ann Griffiths dancing a tarantella:

See her  
at the dance, round  
and round, hand  
in hand, weaving  
invisible threads. (*WA*, p. 50)

The phrase 'hand / in hand' may suggest a gesture of prayer, almost Dürer-like, whilst the spider-web image implies creation.<sup>125</sup> The image of 'invisible threads' links this poem to another, 'Dialectic', where the speaker describes 'the mind swinging / to and fro over an abyss / of blankness' (*F*, p. 24) as the evolution of prayer enters the 'silence / of their equations'. However, 'God listened to them / as to a spider spinning its web / from its entrails'. God delights 'in the geometry' and the 'figures / that beget more figures' because they are music to him – which reflects his own creativity. Pantycelyn would doubtless have agreed with this idea of glorifying God in science. The nocturnal vista is God's own geometry which reflects the silken threads of the spider's web.<sup>126</sup> The lines between the constellations are also reflected in the geometrical workings-out in a scientist's notebook. Ultimately, God is the first scientist/poet. He is presented thus sitting at a laboratory table in the

poem 'At it' where God 'writes there / in invisible handwriting the instructions / the genes follow' (*F*, p. 15). God's experiments and workings-out attract the gaze of 'the first-born of the imagination' (*CLP*, p. 101), the scientists and the poets.

Thomas's pilgrim had already started looking up in many of the earlier poems. In 'Mediations', God utters that His kingdom is amongst the stars:

see my beauty  
in the angles between  
stars, in the equations  
of my kingdom. (*LS*, p. 17)

The difference between Thomas and William Williams Pantycelyn is that, in Thomas, Christ seems absent; he is even more absent than the *deus absconditus*. God's beauty is no longer seen in Jesus's visage but rather in the stellar topography of the heavens.<sup>127</sup> The word 'between' in the quotation above brings God to mind as the speaker takes us towards the darkness between the stars rather than aiming for the light they produce.<sup>128</sup> In 'Out there', Thomas takes his pilgrim towards the conurbations and imagines 'another country' (*LS*, p. 4). Yet, 'When the residents use their eyes, / it is not shapes they see but the distance / between them.' 'Between' reminds the reader again that God might be present in the absence. Or, to put it differently, these poems focus on the in-between spaces, rather than on Pantycelyn's vision of lights penetrating from the darkness. The old emphasis on sight is juxtaposed with the idea of *not seeing*, which in itself is faith: 'the evidence of things not seen'.<sup>129</sup> Thomas takes the biblical statement even more literally than Pantycelyn. The things not seen become quasi-evidence for *the* thing which will never be seen – God.

What the pilgrim does see are other pilgrims along the way. Returning to 'Fugue for Ann Griffiths', Thomas's pilgrim (or the 'traveller up learning's / slope': *WA*, p. 51) looks up and sees Ann Griffiths 'ahead of [him] on her knees'. Like Pantycelyn, Ann is portrayed as an eternal pilgrim who, although 'decomposed / is composed again in her hymns' (*WA*, p. 51). The eternal pilgrim-figure of Ann is that 'figure-head of a ship' (*WA*, p. 51), leaning faithfully over the Kierkegaardian 'fathoms / of anguish' (*WA*, p. 52), of the existential or experiential 'rough seas' (*WA*, p. 51) where Christ is the pilot of

her soul.<sup>130</sup> This image is directly echoed in ‘Waiting’ where the speaker is:

now, leaning far out  
over an immense depth, letting  
your name go and waiting,  
somewhere between faith and doubt,  
for the echoes of its arrival. (*F*, p. 32)

The emphasis on sound in both poems, especially with the use of sonic words such as ‘composing’, ‘echoes’, ‘singing’ or ‘fugue’, juxtaposes the sound-accompanying Ann with the speaker in ‘Waiting’ who is accompanied by silence. Both pilgrim figures in ‘Fugue’ and ‘Waiting’ are ‘leaning far out’ (*F*, p. 32), but the company they keep and their context are completely different. In the case of Ann, ‘she was not / alone’ because ‘a trinity of persons / saw to it she kept on course’ whilst Thomas’s pilgrim, in ‘Waiting’, proclaims ‘Face to face? Ah, no / God’ (*F*, p. 32) – which is an ambiguous answer to an experiential question.<sup>131</sup> The ‘trinity of persons’ steering Griffiths is likely to be the Trinitarian God; but perhaps it is their manifestation in nature that Thomas sees as her true guide. In the context of navigation, the three persons might refer to the three stars in Orion’s belt: Zeta, Epsilon and Delta. Griffiths looks at the light and sees her Saviour; Thomas looks at the ‘great absence’ (*F*, p. 48) which ‘is like a presence’ and does not see God. Similarly, in the poem ‘Night Sky’, ‘Godhead / is the colonisation by mind / of untenanted space’ (*F*, p. 18). God remains the ‘no / God’ (*F*, p. 32) of ‘Waiting’ because ‘they’ merely call out a name ‘looking / in your direction’ (*F*, p. 32). Thomas’s pilgrim is looking into the dark rather than into the light.

The experience of the poets is very different. ‘Fugue for Ann Griffiths’ states that Ann encountered the ‘One / with his eye on her’, and the fact that ‘she saw him’ (*WA*, p. 51) suggests an experiential success that Thomas seeks and fails to understand: the Gospel that Ann lived and breathed is characterised by the line ‘[a] forgiveness / [that is] too impossible to believe in’ (*WA*, p. 55). Therefore, although Thomas’s pilgrim seeks to copy Ann by gazing upwards, even modernising ‘the anachronism’ (*F*, p. 48) of his language, he seemingly fails to experience God. These poems are all saturated with Thomas’s own *agon* with the Trinitarian God. Thomas might have let God’s ‘name go’ (*WA*, p. 32) in

prayer but he also literally *lets go* of God's names, those names that traditionally denote the character and attributes of the Trinitarian Deity. Ann never abandons the Trinitarian God and there is a sense of 'calmness' in 'her harbours' (WA, p. 52). For Thomas, Jesus 'is a face / gathering moss' (WA, p. 54), 'a myth' that is slowly being forgotten because his voice is getting quieter – 'the effect of the recession of our belief' (WA, p. 54). Christ is a concept placed on the 'wrong end / of the spectrum under the Doppler / effect', which results in silence.

These different pilgrim experiences are manifest in the multivalent sylvan images that re-appear throughout the 'Fugue.' Ann sees Christ 'under the branches' which brings her most famous experiential hymn to mind: 'Wle'n sefyll rhwng y myrtwydd / Wrthrych teilwng o fy mryd' ('There he stands among the myrtles, / Worthiest object of my love').<sup>132</sup> This reference is made possible by Ann's *experiencing* of two further trees. First (and most obvious) is the tree of Calvary, whereby 'that forgiveness / too impossible to believe in' (WA, p. 55) was acquired by the sacrificial and atoning death of Jesus Christ. The second is Ann's own tree, possibly of language, on which she is crucified daily because of her experiential agony during the composition of her hymns. Thomas sees the deciduous green tree (WA, p. 55) of language renewed constantly. Every hymn that Ann wrote was a kind of oxymoronic experience because her 'flesh [was] trembling' (WA, p. 54) 'at the splendour of . . . forgiveness' (WA, p. 55). After all, she is a suffering poet who constantly muses on the death of her Saviour. Ann Griffiths is then portrayed as a kind of crucified effigy on the prow of a ship before fusing into a 'bone bough / at eternity's window' suggesting that Griffiths becomes a part of the green tree of her own poetry. The experiential agony of an absent Saviour, meditation on the scenes of Golgotha and writing about her Saviour's agonies enable the formation of a quasi-Kierkegaardian poet: an 'unhappy [wo]man who hides deep anguish in [her] heart' to create poetry, for the 'lips are so formed that when the sigh and cry pass through them, it sounds like lovely music.'<sup>133</sup> The evolving metaphor of the tree is one of Thomas's greatest successes in the poem. Ann Griffiths sang at 'eternity's window' (WA, p. 54) and saw Christ 'stand / under the branches' (WA, p. 51) of 'the myrtle' (WA, p. 50). She experienced God in a way that Thomas himself seeks to imitate:

I have waited for him  
under the tree of science,  
and he has not come (*CLP*, p. 56)

Thomas's pilgrim is not only a 'slow / traveller' (*F*, p. 18) but remains lost because he simply cannot hear 'the one who called' (*WA*, p. 55) and directed Ann. The tree that Thomas goes to, however, has 'boughs / [that] are of plastic': it is artificial and lifeless. The pilgrim evolves. The pilgrimage also rapidly changes. Perhaps what Thomas needed was not only an abandonment of traditional language but a new vision of God altogether.

### **'Lord of the molecule and the atom'<sup>134</sup> – a new vision of God**

---

John Pikoulis suggests that, in Thomas's poetry, the divine is no longer 'in the universe; he *is* the universe – black holes, atomic weights and all'.<sup>135</sup> In 'Hebrews 12<sup>29</sup>' Thomas had already suggested that the mistake he was making was 'to confer features upon a presence / that is not human' (*EA*, p. 11). As we have seen, Thomas let God's 'name go' (*WA*, p. 32); this was the necessary sacrifice in order to hope to experience the Deity of modernity. In 'Bravo', the first few lines describe a pilgrim who no longer sounds like a human:

I know there is nothing in me  
but cells and chromosomes  
waiting to beget chromosomes  
and cells. (*F*, p. 22)

There is neutrality in that description of humanity. Original sin, the poem suggests, is no longer 'in me' but I am not good either. In a poem from *The Echoes Return Slow*, God is also this neutral figure, existing somewhere between love and evil:

What matter  
for grief? The stars are as dew  
in its world, punctuating  
an unending story. It is the spirit-

level which, if love cannot  
disturb, neither can evil. (CLP, p. 52)

'The stars are as dew' suggests that God ('Duw' in Welsh) disappears like the stars or dew once morning comes. In the darkness, God evolves into mere punctuation marks along the unending sentences of the universe. This contrasts with Pantycelyn's view of an author God. Thomas takes the author, kills him, kills the language (even his name) and reduces him to a mere mark. The use of 'spirit- / level' encourages the orthodox reader; the pun denotes a guide used by *homo faber* to build, but also indicates that a kind of balancing is needed for survival. God becomes the Universe. He is presented as darkness, light, stars and molecules. He is even the author of evolution itself: 'The controls / were working: the small / eaten by the large, the large, / by the larger' (CLP, p. 87). He is the 'Lord of the molecule and the atom' (CLP, p. 119) rather than the human's own God.

In *Counterpoint*, Thomas re-tells the story of redemption. There is no longer a single incarnation:

And his coming testified  
to not by one star  
arrested temporality  
over a Judaic manger,  
but by constellations innumerable  
as dew upon surfaces  
he has passed over time  
and again, taking to himself  
the first-born of the imagination  
but without the age-old requirement of blood. (CLP, p. 101)

The references here to the Passover are fused with the orthodox Incarnation of Jesus Christ. The 'one star' that signified the birth of Christ is multiplied. Thomas sees 'other incarnations' (CLP, p. 101) as multiple as the 'constellations innumerable', proclaiming that the scientists and poets have been born – modern questors after the 'ultimate truth'. God is re-dressed and metamorphosed from Exodus's Angel of Death into a life-giving being who takes the 'first-born of the imagination' 'without the age-old requirement of blood'. Because there is no need for a remission of sin, there is no need for a blood sacrifice. To

Thomas, these are archaic concepts from which humanity has moved on since Pantycelyn's day.<sup>136</sup>

Perhaps the greatest swerve from Pantycelyn is the way in which Thomas re-addresses the concept of salvation. In the 'Incarnation' section of *Counterpoint*, Thomas imagines another crucifixion in which 'man's body / was nailed to' a 'rod / and the crankshaft' (*CLP*, p. 92) – this time, 'with no power / to atone'. The machine mocks man who is now the crucified being:

'If you were so clever  
as to invent me, come down  
now so that I may believe.' (*CLP*, p. 92)

The cross here becomes an experimental laboratory where Thomas can test different theories regarding God. Later in *Counterpoint*, Jesus, or God, is put back up on the cross:

I have seen the figure  
on our human tree, burned  
into it by thought's lightning  
and it writhed as I looked. (*CLP*, p. 104)

The crucifixion has been thought so much about that the figure on it, the God-man, Christ-Jesus cannot be separated from the wood. Perhaps the emphasis on death in Christianity forbids the concept of a Risen Saviour; he is de-humanised, for Thomas says, 'it writhed as I looked' (my emphasis). This figure, whether it is God or the 'sun', gives life but it also burns. As the spaceman journeys towards the sun, the reader fears that the result will be another Icarus-like experience. But inevitable darkness envelops the questor:

I stare up into the darkness  
of his countenance, knowing it  
a reflection of the three days and nights  
at the back of love's looking-  
glass (*CLP*, p. 104)

There is another side to God which is unfathomable. Thomas abandons the concept of God as person or 'persons' and sees Him as the sun

and darkness, flower and bacteria; he is the ultimate being, totally unknowable. Thomas touches on what Jean-Luc Marion calls a 'God without Being' – a Deity which transcends ontology.<sup>137</sup> God does not need 'Being' to exist; God is revealed and exists as 'pure gift' in the form of *Agape* (the highest Christian love; a self-giving love), a love that does not require Being.<sup>138</sup> He is a God that suspends the ethical, as in 'At It', where His actions proceed 'eternally / in the silence beyond right and wrong' (*F*, p. 15). In 'Sonata in X', Thomas asks 'Why did I address it / in person?' (*CLP*, p. 206), whilst in a later poem from *Residues* called 'Space Walking', Thomas finally departs from Christ – the ultimate personality of God. He imagines himself like Peter drowning because he is 'unable / to believe you had arms / to sustain me' (*CLP*, p. 311). Indeed, Thomas goes further and proclaims that 'There is no saviour / walking the waves' because 'the old stories are / done'. Christ is no more and God is forever changed.

Thomas almost became a 'strong poet' – someone who managed to overcome Pantycelyn and to clear imaginative space for himself. However, ultimately, Thomas could never silence Pantycelyn, a national poet who experienced God in a way that Thomas never did. Relatedly, Bobi Jones suggests that Thomas, like T. H. Parry-Williams,<sup>139</sup> envied Ann Griffiths's religious experience.<sup>140</sup> However, Griffiths was a woman. When considering both Ann and Thomas's wife Elsie, Tony Brown notes: 'Neither woman is seen [by Thomas] as lover or as mother. The wife is seen as capable of a detached, undemanding, unthreatening, and therefore genuinely affectionate relationship between *equals*.'<sup>141</sup> As such, Ann does not threaten Thomas's *masculine* identity. However, a true 'equal' should have inspired this filial 'anxiety of influence'. Ann Griffiths does not seem to do this, although, like Jones suggests, Thomas may have envied her spiritual experience. Pantycelyn is the Calvinistic Methodist who truly haunts Thomas, for he cannot wholly suppress this most influential of predecessors. Certainly, Thomas successfully adapted many of Pantycelyn's images as well as writing poetry that aesthetically surpassed his predecessor. However, Pantycelyn remains on the lips of the rugby fans. Most importantly, both Pantycelyn and Griffiths are comfortably sitting under the myrtle tree whilst Thomas keeps waiting in uncertainty under the plastic branches, staring at and scanning the starry sky.

## About the author

---

Nathan Munday is a third-year SWW-DTP (South West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership) student at Cardiff and Aberystwyth Universities. His comparative PhD thesis explores Welsh religious poetry between 1700 and 2000, looking at how theological changes in Wales were manifested in poetry. He completed an MA in 2015 on the unexpected relationship between R. S. Thomas and Pantycelyn (on which this article is based and which also won the ‘New Scholars’ category of the 2016 M. Wynn Thomas Prize). He is originally from Carmarthenshire – Pantycelyn’s county. He enjoys mountaineering and creative writing. His book, *Seven Days: A Pyrenean Adventure* (Parthian), was published in 2017. An early version of this book came second in the New Welsh Writing Awards 2016.

Quotations from R. S. Thomas’s poems are reproduced by kind permission of Rhodri Thomas and Caroline Moorey. All R. S. Thomas’s poems are © Elodie Thomas.

- <sup>1</sup> The quotation in the title of this article is taken from *The Minister*, in R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945–1990* (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), pp. 42–55: p. 43. References to *Collected Poems* hereafter *CP*.
- <sup>2</sup> Jason Walford Davies has explored Thomas’s debts to the Welsh literary tradition but does not engage with Pantycelyn in any depth. See Jason Walford Davies, *Gororau’r Iaith: R. S. Thomas a’r Traddodiad Llenyddol Cymraeg* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 78, 199–200, 319.
- <sup>3</sup> M. Wynn Thomas, *In the Shadow of the Pulpit: Literature and Nonconformist Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), p. 334 and Tony Brown, ‘Eve’s Ruse: Identity and Gender in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas’, *English*, 49/195 (2000), 229–50.
- <sup>4</sup> Brown, ‘Eve’s Ruse’, 243, 245 and 246.
- <sup>5</sup> See especially Rowan Williams, ‘Suspending the ethical: R. S. Thomas and Kierkegaard’, in Damian Walford Davies (ed.), *Echoes to the Amen, Essays after R. S. Thomas* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 206–19 and William V. Davis, *R. S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), pp. 123–42.
- <sup>6</sup> In R. S. Thomas’s ‘A Grave Unvisited’, Kierkegaard holds the speaker’s hand: ‘Hand and hand like a child / With its father’ (*CP*, p. 183). See also Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), p. 334. The notion of seventy thousand fathoms is one of Kierkegaard’s most frequently used metaphors – ‘out in the Sea of Thought, out in “70,000 fathoms deep”’ – suggesting the danger in terms of humanity’s relationship with God. Thomas’s work reflects the Kierkegaardian idea that God can never fully be known except with fear and trembling. This concept was developed by theologians such as Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) whose formula, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, is mentioned by Thomas in his introduction to R. S. Thomas (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), pp. 7–11: p. 9.

- <sup>7</sup> Justin Wintle, *Furious Interiors: Wales, R. S. Thomas and God* (London: Harper, 1996), p. 78. Pantycelyn was the farmhouse near Llandovery where William Williams was based throughout most of his life. Its name became synonymous with the hymn-writer.
- <sup>8</sup> In Welsh, 'pilgrimage' is *pererindod* and a 'pilgrim' is *pererin*. The word 'pilgrimage' derives, via the French *pèlerinage*, from the Latin *peregrinus*, 'foreign', and *per ager*, 'going through the fields' – it is the action described rather than the goal. See Ian Reader, *Pilgrimage: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 20.
- <sup>9</sup> D. Ben Rees, 'Aspects of the Early Years of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism', *Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymdeithas Hanes y Methodistiaid Calfinaidd*, 29–30 (2005–6), 5–24: 10.
- <sup>10</sup> Eifion Evans, *Bread of Heaven* (Bridgend: Bryntirion, 2010), pp. 18–21.
- <sup>11</sup> It is interesting to compare Pantycelyn's and Thomas's unorthodox careers in the Church. Pantycelyn was never actually ordained a priest because of his 'absenting himself on several Lord's days and not performing divine service in the said parish'. According to Thomas Charles, 'He [Pantycelyn] used to relate with much humour how he was summoned to the Bishop's court to answer charges of nineteen sins, of all of which he was guilty. Such things as failing to make the sign of the cross when baptizing, failing to read some parts of the service and so on . . . He never received full ordination, his bishop refusing to ordain him because of his irregularity in preaching in all places, not merely the churches of his parishes.' Pantycelyn was ordained deacon by the bishop of St David's in August 1740 and licensed 'to perform the office of curate' at Llanwrtyd and Llanddewi Abergwesyn, two parishes in Breconshire. See John Morgan Jones and William Morgan, *The Calvinistic Methodist Fathers of Wales*, vol. 1, trans. John Aaron (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2008), p. 227 and Evans, *Bread of Heaven*, pp. 26–36.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Protestantism – the adroit castrator / Of art; the bitter negation / Of song and dance and the heart's innocent joy': from *The Minister* (CP, p. 54).
- <sup>13</sup> R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge, *Anglo-Welsh Review*, 74 (1983), 36–56: 47–8.
- <sup>14</sup> Seiat: this was the Methodist Experience Meeting where Christians gathered and shared their spiritual experiences under the careful eye of a Seiat leader, who would be a more experienced Christian. Dr Alethius in Pantycelyn's *Theomemphus* is such a character and Pantycelyn himself was well known for being a very good leader in the various Seiat meetings. The emphasis in these meetings was always on personal spiritual experiences. See Eifion Evans, *Fire in the Thatch* (Bridgend: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1996), chapter 7.
- <sup>15</sup> E. Wyn James, 'The evolution of the Welsh hymn', in Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (eds), *Dissenting Praise: Religious Dissent and the Hymn in England and Wales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 230–68: p. 245. Pantycelyn's three major collections are *Caniadau y Rhai sydd ar y Môr o Wydr . . . i Frenin y Saint* ('The Songs of Those who are on the Sea of Glass . . . to the Saints' King') (1762); *Ffarwel Weledig, Groesaw Anweledig Bethau* ('Farewell Visible, Welcome Invisible Things') (1763–9); and *Gloria in Excelsis: Neu Hymnau o Fawl i Dduw a'r Oen* ('Gloria in Excelsis: Or Hymns of Praise to God and the Lamb') (1771–2).
- <sup>16</sup> Thomas (ed.), *Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, p. 9.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Postscript', in R. S. Thomas, *H'm* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 22.
- <sup>18</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 55: 'Many of the central doctrines of traditional Christianity can be grammatically expressed only in the form of metaphor.'
- <sup>19</sup> Vimala Herman, 'Negativity and Language in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas', *ELH*, 45/4 (1978), 710–31: 712.
- <sup>20</sup> Thomas (ed.), *Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, p. 8. Thomas's formulation here recalls the discourse of the English Romantic poets, whose work influenced him.
- <sup>21</sup> Thomas (ed.), *Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, p. 9.

- <sup>22</sup> Kathryn Jenkins, 'Williams Pantycelyn', in Branwen Jarvis (ed.), *A Guide to Welsh Literature Volume IV, c.1700–1800* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 257: 'The pragmatic and spiritual concerns about the condition of the Methodist cause were of far greater importance to Williams than the literary or aesthetic merit of his work.'
- <sup>23</sup> James, 'The evolution of the Welsh hymn', p. 229; M. Wynn Thomas, *R. S. Thomas: Serial Obsessive* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 57 and R. S. Thomas, 'Some Contemporary Scottish Writing', *Wales*, 6/3 (1946), 98–103: 102–3.
- <sup>24</sup> Christopher Morgan, *R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment and Deity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 4.
- <sup>25</sup> Ned Thomas and John Barnie, 'Probing: An Interview with R. S. Thomas', *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*, 80 (1990), 28–52: 35.
- <sup>26</sup> Morgan, *R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment and Deity*, p. 4.
- <sup>27</sup> Thomas, *Serial Obsessive*, p. 57. It is important to note that R. S. Thomas was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature; this is another indicator of his 'national' status.
- <sup>28</sup> D. M. Lloyd Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), p. 195.
- <sup>29</sup> The *evangelicalism* of Calvinistic Methodism fits within David Bebbington's four defining characteristics of evangelical Christianity: conversionism, activism, Biblicism and crucicentrism. See David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), p. 3. However, as Joel R. Beeke notes, Bebbington is mistaken in arguing that 'evangelicalism first took form in the 1730s': see Joel R. Beeke, 'Evangelicalism and the Dutch Further Reformation', in Michael A. G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart (eds), *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), pp. 146–70: p. 147. For a very good overview of the evolution of Protestantism in Wales see Thomas, *In the Shadow of the Pulpit*, chapter 1.
- <sup>30</sup> David Ceri Jones, Boyd Stanley Schlenther and Eryn Mant White (eds), *The Elect Methodists: Calvinistic Methodism in England and Wales 1735–1811* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 1.
- <sup>31</sup> See again Thomas, *In the Shadow of the Pulpit*, chapter 1, for a discussion of the pluralistic nature of British Protestantism.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Mystical Theology', in Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright and J. I. Packer (eds), *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester and Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), p. 448 and Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 7 (London: Longman and Todd, 1971), p. 15.
- <sup>33</sup> For the provenance of this phrase, see Brian Patrick McGuire (trans.), *Jean Gerson: Early Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), pp. xv and 352. The relevant notion in Aquinas's work is to be found in the *Summa Theologiae*, II.2, quaestio 97, art. 2 arg. 2, in his 'refutation of the premise that "it is not a sin to tempt God"' (Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 5). Here, as Schäfer explains, Aquinas 'distinguishes between two forms of knowledge of God's goodness (*bonitas*) or will (*voluntas*), one speculative (*speculativa*) and the other affective or experiential (*affectiva seu experimentalis*) . . . [I]t is only through this affective-experiential way that [a believer is] allowed, according to Aquinas, to prove God's will and taste his sweetness.' For the passage under discussion here, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Benziger Bros. Edition, 1947) *Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, pp. 3666–7, [www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.pdf](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.pdf), accessed 22 June 2017; for the Latin version, see 'Sancti Thomae de Aquino Summa Theologiae Secunda Pars Secundae Partis a Quaestione XCII ad Quaestionem C', *Corpus Thomisticum*, [www.corpusthomicum.org/sth3092.html](http://www.corpusthomicum.org/sth3092.html), accessed 22 June 2017.

- <sup>34</sup> Eifion Evans, 'Calvinistic Methodism', in Ferguson, Wright and Packer (eds), *New Dictionary of Theology*, pp. 124–5.
- <sup>35</sup> Evans, *Bread of Heaven*, p. 38.
- <sup>36</sup> The Englishman George Whitefield (1714–70) was the most famous exception. He was closely associated with the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists.
- <sup>37</sup> Divine Predestination: the belief that God had 'elected' individuals, a particular people, for eternal salvation.
- <sup>38</sup> This branch of theology follows the writings of Jacobinus Arminius (1560–1609), the Latinised name of the Dutch theologian Jakob Hermanszoon.
- <sup>39</sup> Eifion Evans, *Pursued by God: A Selective Translation with Notes of the Welsh Religious Classic Theomemphus by William Williams Pantycelyn* (Bridgend: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1996), p. 9.
- <sup>40</sup> Gomer Morgan Roberts (ed.), *Gweithiau William Williams Pantycelyn*, vol. 1 (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964), p. 253 and – for the translation given in the main text above – Evans, *Pursued by God*, p. 96. Evans's selective translation has sought faithfully to capture Pantycelyn's meaning rather than being a complete translation. References to Roberts (ed.), *Gweithiau William Williams Pantycelyn*, vol. 1 hereafter *GWWP*.
- <sup>41</sup> Or 'Not found in earthly creatures, nor under God's heaven' (my translation).
- <sup>42</sup> Or 'By grace, a full forgiveness, for every sin that be' (my translation).
- <sup>43</sup> Or 'Most odious, most dirty sins ever known on earth' (my translation).
- <sup>44</sup> John Morgan Jones and William Morgan (eds), *Y Tadau Methodistiaidd*, vol. 1 (Swansea: Lewis Evans, 1895), pp. 149–50.
- <sup>45</sup> There was an established literary tradition around pilgrimage long before Pantycelyn. Arguably a biblical motif, medieval texts such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (c.1380) and Langland's *Piers Plowman* (c.1370–90) established the three types of Roman Catholic pilgrimages – 'place', 'moral' and 'interior' pilgrimages.
- <sup>46</sup> See Joseph Alleine's *A Sure Guide to Heaven* (Welsh editions appeared in 1693 and 1723). Henry Walker's *Spiritual Experiences, of Sundry Beleevers* (1653) documents how important the conversion narrative or 'conversion journey' was. Notice the experiential language used: 'That Christian beleeves strongest, that hath *Experience* to backe his faith, and that Saint speakes sweetest and homest, that speakes experimentally; for that which cometh from one spirituall heart, reacheth another spirituall heart. *Experience* is like steel to an edged tool, or like salt to fresh meat, it seasons brain-knowledge, and settles a shaking, unsetled soule . . . *heart-knowledge* is both necessary and precious to sincere soules.' Quoted in Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 75.
- <sup>47</sup> Spiritual autobiographical testimonies were so common around the 1650s that John Beadle wrote a 'recipe for spiritual autobiography' which often used the image of a spiritual traveller. See John Beadle, *The Journal or Diary of a Thankful Christian* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1656) and Robert Bell, 'Metamorphoses of Spiritual Autobiography', *ELH*, 44/1 (1977), 108–26.
- <sup>48</sup> Evans, *Bread of Heaven*, p. 47.
- <sup>49</sup> William Williams Pantycelyn, 'Hymn I, in N. Cynhafal Jones (ed.), *Gweithiau Williams Pantycelyn*, vol. 2 (Newport, Monmouthshire: W. Jones, 1891), p. 6. References to *Gweithiau Williams Pantycelyn* hereafter *GWP*.
- <sup>50</sup> My translation.
- <sup>51</sup> For Bunyan's work I have used the facsimile of the 1678 first edition. See John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come under the Similitude of a Dream as Originally Published by John Bunyan Being a Facsimile Reproduction of The First Edition* (London: Elliot Stock, 1878).

- <sup>52</sup> Ten of Pantycelyn's hymns begin with the word 'Pererin' or pilgrim whilst over half of the hymns mention some aspect of spiritual pilgrimage.
- <sup>53</sup> Davis, R. S. *Thomas: Poetry and Theology*, p. x.
- <sup>54</sup> 'No-One', in R. S. Thomas, *Autobiographies*, ed. and trans. Jason Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1997), pp. 25–109: p. 106.
- <sup>55</sup> Patrick Gardiner, *Kierkegaard: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 44–5.
- <sup>56</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (London: Collins, 1961), p. 163 and Charles E. Moore (ed.), *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard* (New York: Plough, 2002), p. xxviii. Individualism and 'personal accountability' are reflected in Kierkegaard's philosophy which, glossed with his own Lutheran convictions, expressed similar ideas to Pantycelyn's Methodism. Thomas started collecting Kierkegaard's works in university and he began to identify with the philosopher's experiences of a God that is absolutely different. Kierkegaard emphasised the importance of 'first-hand faith': one must 'hear God's voice as an individual'. Also, for a very helpful overview, see R. C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas: Understanding the Concepts that Shaped Our World* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), p. 156.
- <sup>57</sup> A. Dru (ed. and trans.), *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 533 and William C. Davis, 'Kierkegaard on the Transformation of the Individual in Conversion', *Religious Studies*, 28/2 (1992), 145–63: 145.
- <sup>58</sup> Lloyd Jones, *The Puritans*, p. 196. On Pantycelyn: '[There was] a great desire for a knowledge of God – a direct knowledge of God: not to believe things about God – they had already got that – but the desire to know God. "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3).'
- <sup>59</sup> Glyn Tegai Hughes, *Williams Pantycelyn* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1983), p. iv: 'The only more or less contemporary likeness of Williams is a rough sketch drawn from memory by an amateur, some years after his death. This sketch was used by the publisher Mackenzie as the basis for a portrait in Kilsby Jones's edition of the works. Larger prints were made of it and at one time *they adorned many homes in Wales*' (my emphasis). For the sketch and its idealised version see Evans, *Bread of Heaven*, plates 10 and 11.
- <sup>60</sup> R. S. Thomas's relation to Pantycelyn may be viewed through the lens of Harold Bloom's theory of the 'anxiety of influence', which posits that the influence of dominant precursor poets inspires a sense of anxiety in living poets. See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- <sup>61</sup> *CP*, p. 43.
- <sup>62</sup> 'The Big Preachers', in R. S. Thomas, *Uncollected Poems*, ed. Tony Brown and Jason Walford Davies (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2013), p. 120. References to *Uncollected Poems* hereafter *UP*.
- <sup>63</sup> Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (ed. and trans.), *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, vol. 6 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), pp. 77–8: 'Through my writings I hope to achieve the following: to leave behind me so accurate a characterisation of Christianity and its relationships in the world that an enthusiastic, noble-minded young person will be able to find in it a map of relationships as accurate as any topographical map from the most famous institutes' (1848).
- <sup>64</sup> The reference to 'Cynfal' in *The Minister (CP)*, p. 43) is to Cynfal Fawr, the famous home of Morgan Llwyd. This is another figure of the early 'dissenting' tradition to which, perhaps, Thomas found himself drawn. Llwyd was a profound believer in the indwelling God. See M. Wynn Thomas, *Morgan Llwyd* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1984), p. 72, who notes: 'Morgan Llwyd would have agreed with Kierkegaard that the great danger

is of the reader coming to religious books as a theatre-goer goes to a theatre, in order to listen passively to the actor. Like Kierkegaard he constructed his books so as to circumvent this danger: in them the author is a prompter, it is the reader who is the actor and the audience is God'

<sup>65</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 203–30.

<sup>66</sup> Wintle, *Furious Interiors*, p. 78.

<sup>67</sup> Jason Walford Davies, 'Introduction', in Thomas, *Autobiographies*, pp. ix–xxxv: p. xvii.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas, 'No-One', p. 77.

<sup>69</sup> R. S. Thomas, *Welsh Aims* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1987), p. 38. Hereafter *WA*.

<sup>70</sup> The context for such language is 1957, when Parliament passed a Bill that would result in the drowning of Capel Celyn in 1965 in order to create a reservoir that would provide water for the city of Liverpool.

<sup>71</sup> See Acts 27:39–44 and Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 334.

<sup>72</sup> R. S. Thomas, *Poetry for Supper* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964), pp. 9–12. Hereafter *PS*.

<sup>73</sup> See Thomas, 'Reservoirs' (*CP*, p. 194).

<sup>74</sup> M. Wynn Thomas, "'Keeping his pen clean": R. S. Thomas and Wales', in William V. Davis (ed.), *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R. S. Thomas* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), pp. 61–79: p. 62.

<sup>75</sup> R. S. Thomas, *Laboratories of the Spirit* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 29. Hereafter *LS*. Interestingly, Thomas is using a biblical simile in 'Ann Griffith'. Both Pantycelyn and Griffiths draw on the biblical image of the 'heart's well'. In the preface to *Theomemphus*, Pantycelyn notes that the work 'issued from my spirit like water from a spring or like a web from the spider's body' (my translation; see also Evans, *Pursued by God*, p. 57). This suggests that Thomas had probably read *Theomemphus*. For Griffiths's deployment of this biblical image, see Letters IV and VI, and Hymns II and XXX: H. A. Hodges (trans.), 'Letters of Ann Griffiths', *Gwefan Ann Griffiths Website*, Cardiff University, [www.anngriffiths.cardiff.ac.uk/letters.html](http://www.anngriffiths.cardiff.ac.uk/letters.html), accessed 12 July 2017 and H. A. Hodges (trans.), 'Hymns of Ann Griffiths', *Gwefan Ann Griffiths Website*, Cardiff University, [www.anngriffiths.cardiff.ac.uk/hymns.html](http://www.anngriffiths.cardiff.ac.uk/hymns.html), accessed 28 June 2017.

<sup>76</sup> Brown, 'Eve's Ruse', 245–6.

<sup>77</sup> Brown, 'Eve's Ruse', 245–6.

<sup>78</sup> This effigy, based on contemporary descriptions, is in the Ann Griffiths Memorial Chapel (opened in July 1904) at Dolanog, a village near her home. For a reproduction, see 'Ann Griffiths (1776–1805)', *Gwefan Ann Griffiths Website*, Cardiff University, [www.anngriffiths.cardiff.ac.uk/](http://www.anngriffiths.cardiff.ac.uk/), accessed 22 June 2017.

<sup>79</sup> My translation:

Dechreu Canu, dechreu canmol	Beginning to sing, beginning to praise
Ymhen myrdd o oesoedd maith,	At the end of a myriad of vast ages.
Y bydd pawb o'r gwaredigion,	Everyone, yes, all the ransomed,
R' ochr draw ar ben eu thait;	having finished their journey, now, on the other side;
Ni bydd diwedd	Without ending
Byth ar sw'n y delyn aur.	Is the sound of the golden harp.

<sup>80</sup> My translation.

<sup>81</sup> The psalm itself is about longing for Zion in the foreign lands of Babylon. There is a 'hiraeth' when the Psalmist notes: 'How shall we sing the Lord's song / in a foreign land?'

<sup>82</sup> Serena Davies, 'Harpo and Dali: Surreal Double Act', *Telegraph*, 26 May 2007, [www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3665391/Harpo-and-Dali-a-surreal-double-act.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3665391/Harpo-and-Dali-a-surreal-double-act.html), accessed 13

- October 2016. Thomas must have known about Salvador Dalí's gift to Harpo Marx. In 1937, 'Dalí sent Harpo a Christmas present: a harp with barbed wire for strings and spoons for tuning knobs, wrapped in cellophane. Harpo was delighted and sent Dalí a photograph of himself sitting at the harp with bandaged fingers as if he'd been playing it and cutting himself on the wire.'
- <sup>83</sup> See R. S. Thomas to Raymond Garlick, 19 February 1952, in Jason Walford Davies (ed.), *R. S. Thomas: Letters to Raymond Garlick* (Llandysul: Gomer, 2009), p. 8: 'I would like to boast that no one loves the old things of Wales more than I do, and yet there is something fearful in thinking "ni bydd diwedd byth ar swm y delyn aur"' (see n. 79 above for my translation of this quotation).
- <sup>84</sup> These mythological birds are mentioned in the *Mabinogi*. They give life through their singing.
- <sup>85</sup> 'Mediations', in *LS*, p. 17.
- <sup>86</sup> Thomas (ed.), *Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, p. 9.
- <sup>87</sup> Thomas and Barnie, 'Probings', 36–9.
- <sup>88</sup> Thomas, 'Unity', in Sandra Anstey (ed.), *R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose* (Bridgend: Seren, 1995), pp. 143–58; pp. 147–8.
- <sup>89</sup> John Pikoulis, "'The curious stars": R. S. Thomas and the scientific revolution', in Damian Walford Davies (ed.), *Echoes to the Amen: Essays after R. S. Thomas* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 76–111; p. 96.
- <sup>90</sup> Davis, *R. S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology*, pp. 111–21.
- <sup>91</sup> The ghost of Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology* (German in 1954, English in 1977) haunts R.S.'s treatment of the machine. Heidegger talks about the essence of technology. There is a difference between the concept of *bringing-forth* (poeisis) and *challenging-forth* (modern technology based on exact science). See Ned Thomas, 'R. S. Thomas: The Question about Technology', *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*, 92 (1992), 54–60.
- <sup>92</sup> R. S. Thomas, *Experimenting with an Amen* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 51. Hereafter *EA*.
- <sup>93</sup> R. S. Thomas, *Collected Later Poems 1988–2000* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2004), p. 184. Hereafter *CLP*.
- <sup>94</sup> Davis, *R. S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology*, p. 119.
- <sup>95</sup> Thomas and Barnie, 'Probings', 36–9.
- <sup>96</sup> John Barnie, 'Review of R. S. Thomas's *Later Poems 1972–1982*', *Poetry Wales*, 18/4 (1983), 90–1.
- <sup>97</sup> II Samuel 12.
- <sup>98</sup> I. T. Ramsey, *Religion and Science* (London: SPCK, 1964), pp. 42–3.
- <sup>99</sup> Ramsey, *Religion and Science*, p. 43.
- <sup>100</sup> William Williams, *Golwg ar Deyrnas Crist*, in *GWWP*, pp. 1–191. All further references to *Golwg ar Deyrnas Crist* (hereafter *GDC*) are from this edition; unless otherwise stated, translations given in the main text are from William Williams, *A View of the Kingdom of Christ; or, Christ Is All and In All. A POEM by way of exposition of Col. iii. 11; 1 Cor. xv. 25*, trans. Robert Jones (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1878). Robert Jones actually based his translation on Pantycelyn's second edition which appeared in 1764.
- <sup>101</sup> Evans, *Bread of Heaven*, p. 136.
- <sup>102</sup> Mathematical distances are noted as well as detailed biological facts. Pantycelyn's footnotes either address or are taken from such works as William Derham's *Astro-Theology* (1714), Richard Blackmore's *Creation* (1715) and James Hervey's *Meditations and Contemplations* (1748).
- <sup>103</sup> William Williams, *Aurora Borealis: NEU, Y GOLEUNI yn y Gogledd, fel arwydd o Lwyddiant yr EFENGYL yn y Dyddiau Diweddaf*, (*Neu, Shekinah'r Mil Blynnyddoedd*):

- Mewn dull o Lythyr oddi wrth ERMENEUS y Lladmerydd, at AGRUPNUS y Gwlyedydd*, in Garfield H. Hughes (ed.), *Gweithiau William Williams Pantycelyn*, vol. 2 (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1967), pp. 161–79. The title of the work translates as 'Aurora Borealis: or the LIGHT in the North, as a sign of the Success of the GOSPEL in the Last Days, (or, The Shekinah of the Thousand Years:) in the form of a Letter from ERMENEUS the Interpreter, to AGRUPNUS the Watchman' (my translation).
- <sup>104</sup> The Northern Lights appeared throughout southern Britain throughout the early 1770s.
- <sup>105</sup> Patrick Crotty, 'Extraordinary man of the bald Welsh hills: the Iago Prytherch poems', in Walford Davies (ed.), *Echoes to the Amen*, pp. 13–43 and Pikoulis, "'The curious stars'", pp. 76–111.
- <sup>106</sup> *GDC*, p. 50; my translation.
- <sup>107</sup> See Pensée 206 in W. F. Trotter (trans.), *Blaise Pascal's Pensées* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), p. 61. Very revealingly, in Thomas's own copy of the *Pensées*, now at the R. S. Thomas Centre in Bangor, he has crossed out 'frightens' and written 'appals' in pencil.
- <sup>108</sup> 'Shadows', in R. S. Thomas, *Frequencies* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 25. References to *Frequencies* hereafter *F*.
- <sup>109</sup> Williams, *A View of the Kingdom of Christ*, p. 47.
- <sup>110</sup> Williams, *A View of the Kingdom of Christ*, p. 47; *GDC*, p. 46.
- <sup>111</sup> Williams, *A View of the Kingdom of Christ*, p. 48.
- <sup>112</sup> *GDC*, pp. 30–2; my translation.
- <sup>113</sup> Williams, *A View of the Kingdom of Christ*, p. 57.
- <sup>114</sup> John 8:12.
- <sup>115</sup> Williams, *A View of the Kingdom of Christ*, p. 58.
- <sup>116</sup> Genesis 2:7: 'And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.' Williams, *A View of the Kingdom of Christ*, p. 55.
- <sup>117</sup> William Derham, *Astro-Theology or a Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God from a Survey of the Heavens* (London: W. Innys, 1715), pp. 23–4. Derham muses on Sirius and the 'enormous' space that surrounds it. As an aside, it is believed that Derham produced the earliest, relatively accurate estimate of the speed of sound.
- <sup>118</sup> John Wesley mentions a sighting of the *Aurora* in Northampton, in his journal entry for 23 October 1769: 'This evening there was such an Aurora Borealis as I never saw before: the colours, both the white, the flame colour, and the scarlet, were so exceedingly strong and beautiful. But they were awful too; so that abundance of people were frightened into many good resolutions.' See Price Livingstone Parker (ed.), *The Journals of John Wesley* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1951), p. 333.
- <sup>119</sup> Williams, *Aurora Borealis*, p. 164.
- <sup>120</sup> Evans, *Bread of Heaven*, p. 232.
- <sup>121</sup> In 1750, Charles Wesley published his *Hymns Occasioned by the Earthquake, March 8, 1750*. This collection was re-issued in 1756 following the Great Earthquake of Lisbon in 1755. On 14 July 1748, George Whitefield had preached a powerful sermon on the Great Eclipse. Pantycelyn himself in *Caniadau Duwiol* (1762) includes a song 'About the Earthquake that happened in many great lands in 1755 and 1756'. See Evans, *Bread of Heaven*, pp. 232–8.
- <sup>122</sup> Howel Harris's diary entry for 16 May 1746. Quoted in Evans, *Bread of Heaven*, p. 237.
- <sup>123</sup> Williams, *Aurora Borealis*, pp. 177, 179.
- <sup>124</sup> Isaiah 9:2, John 8:12 and 12:46.
- <sup>125</sup> In the preface to *Theomemphus*, Pantycelyn notes that (*GWWP*, p. 193): 'Fe reddod y llyfr hwn allan o'm hysbryd fel dwfr o ffynnon, neu we'r pryf copyn o'i fol ei hun' ('issued from my spirit like water from a spring or like a web from the spider's body'). For translation see Evans, *Pursued by God*, p. 57.

- <sup>126</sup> It is possible that R. S. Thomas is recalling the image in the American Puritan divine Jonathan Edwards's famous sermon 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'. See Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses, 1739–1742*, ed. Harry S. Stout, *WJE Online*, vol. 22, p. 411, <http://edwards.yale.edu/archive?path=aHR0cDovL2Vkd2FyZHMueWFsZS5lZHUvY2dpLWJpbi9uZXZwdwAglSby9nZXRxvYmplY3QucGwvYy4yMT00Ny53amVv>, accessed 17 October 2016: 'The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.' Thomas may have come across Edwards's image in Robert Lowell's poem 'Mr Edwards and the Spider': see Robert Lowell, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), p. 59. Thomas became familiar with Lowell's work in the 1960s through his contact with *Critical Quarterly*. See also Edwards's essay 'Of Insects' (c.1719–21): 'Of Insects and Spiders: Scientific Writings by Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)', *A Puritan's Mind*, [www.apuritansmind.com/puritan-favorites/jonathan-edwards/scientific-writings/of-insects/](http://www.apuritansmind.com/puritan-favorites/jonathan-edwards/scientific-writings/of-insects/), accessed 17 October 2016.
- <sup>127</sup> See Hymn CCCCXI (GWP, p. 194): 'Gwyn a gwridog yw fy Arglwydd, / Gwyn a gwridog yw ei wedd' ('White and ruddy is my Lord / White and ruddy is His visage'; my translation).
- <sup>128</sup> Perhaps R. S. Thomas is recalling Robert Frost's 'Desert Places'. See Edward Connery Lathem (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Robert Frost* (London: Vintage, 2013), p. 296: 'They cannot scare me with their empty spaces / Between stars – on stars where no human race / I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself with my own desert places.' The scary image surely fits the kind of state of mind – the *possibility* that there is no God out there – that one finds in R.S. in this period.
- <sup>129</sup> Hebrews 11:1.
- <sup>130</sup> This nautical image re-appears in many of Griffiths's hymns. In Hymn VI, the wise figure of Christ is the pilot of her soul: 'Er cryfed ydyw'r stormydd / Ac ymchwydd tonnau'r môr, / Doethineb ydyw'r peilat, / A'i enw'n gadarn Iôr' ('Though strong may be the tempests / And swellings of the sea, / Yet Wisdom is the pilot; A mighty Lord is he'). In Hymn XIII, Christ is the sinner's friend as well as the same pilot: 'Dyma ei beilat ar y môr' ('Here's their pilot on the deep'). For Griffiths's hymns and translations, see (respectively): E. Wyn James (ed.), 'Emynau', *Gwefan Ann Griffiths Website*, Cardiff University, [www.anngriffiths.cardiff.ac.uk/emynau.html](http://www.anngriffiths.cardiff.ac.uk/emynau.html), accessed 22 June 2017, and Hodges (trans.), 'Hymns of Ann Griffiths'. For the sculpture of Ann Griffiths see n. 78 above.
- <sup>131</sup> The allusion is to Jacob wrestling with the theophany, or the Angel of the Lord, at Penuel (Genesis 32:30).
- <sup>132</sup> Hymn XIII: see James (ed.), 'Emynau'; for the translation, see Hodges (trans.), 'Hymns of Ann Griffiths'. This is a reference to Zechariah 1:8 which describes a vision that the prophet has of Christ standing amongst the myrtle trees.
- <sup>133</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (London: Penguin, 1992 [1843]), p. 1.
- <sup>134</sup> *CLP*, p. 119.
- <sup>135</sup> Pikoulis, "'The curious stars'", p. 107.
- <sup>136</sup> Hebrews 9:22.
- <sup>137</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
- <sup>138</sup> Marion, *God Without Being*, p. 108.
- <sup>139</sup> See 'Ann', in T. H. Parry-Williams, *Myfyrdodau* (Aberystwyth: Gomer, 1957), p. 50: 'Ymhen blynyddoedd lawer wedyn mi geisiais fynegi mewn cân seml fy eiddigedd wrth rai fel hi, a allai dynnu yn "rhaffau'r addewidion" mor hyderus a chanu "caniadau Seion" mor eneiniedig.' My translation: 'After many years, I attempted to express in a simple song

my envy towards people like her, who could claim God's promises (or draw on the ropes of his promises) with such confidence and sing Zion's praises with unction.'

<sup>140</sup> See Bobi Jones, 'R. S. Thomas a'r Genedl', *Barddas*, 199 (1993), 18–19: 'Ann Griffiths oedd cydwybod R. S. Thomas, y bwgan a gododd ef ym Manafon ymlaen drwy Eglwys Fach [sic] i Llŷn; sef cynrychiolydd traddodiad cyfriniol pur wahanol i'r un a arddelai ef ei hun . . . Cefigennu a wna ef tuag at ei llwyddiant i ddal ei chwrs yn gyson er gwaethaf stormydd.' My translation: 'Ann Griffiths was R.S.'s conscience, the spirit he brought forth in Manafon through to Eglwys Fach before reaching Llŷn; she represented a mystical tradition which was totally different to the one R.S. professed . . . He envied her success in keeping to her course even in the worst of storms.'

<sup>141</sup> Brown, 'Eve's Ruse', 248 (my emphasis).

