R.S. Thomas's Poetics of Insomnia

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In an essay on 'Words and the Poet' (1963), Thomas once affirmed his adherence to the 'belief that there is probably something symptomatic in words that tend to recur in a poet's work'; and offered Henry Vaughan, who 'was continually moved by concepts such as light', as his example.[1] As opposed to 'light', concepts such as 'darkness' and 'night' are symptomatic in Thomas's work. Throughout his career as a poet, Thomas had recourse to the motifs of the nocturne – a generic tradition, originally consolidated in the Renaissance, which is 'intent on refiguring those cold, dead and sunless hours feared by most of mankind over millennia into an order of exquisite and numinous experience'.[2] In the dead of night, the time 'when time stops and time is never ending', as T.S. Eliot put it, the sleepless poet negotiates the presence and the absence of God.[3] It is at this time, contemplating the empty spaces of a sublime, cosmic landscape, that he stands vigil for the day to come. 'All night,' Thomas writes in a late poem, 'At the End' (1995), 'I am at / a window not too small / to be frame to the stars…'.[4]

The Minister (1953), Thomas's verse drama for four voices, provides an early example of Thomas's complex, spiritually intense relationship to the night. An autobiographical poem, based on Thomas's experiences as Rector of Manafon in Montgomeryshire during the 1940s and early 1950s, it portrays the social and psychological struggles of a young priest who has been posted, or exiled, to a remote rural community full of hostile parishioners. The poem's Narrator addresses this protagonist, the Minister himself, as a 'wanderer in the night':

> Did you dream, wanderer in the night,
> Of the ruined house with the one light
> Shining; and that you were the moth
> Drawn relentlessly out of the dark?[5]

The isolated light across the moors to which the Minister's vocation drives him, deceptive in its promise of domesticity and safety, is a destructive one. He will never be comfortable, he will never feel at home, in this inimical community, with its atomised, fragmentary population of hill farmers like the one described in 'Affinity' (1946), another early poem, as 'a vague somnambulist' (CP 8). 'You wished you were back in the wide night / Under the stars,' the Narrator tells the Minister in Thomas's verse drama. But, when the Minister tries to leave, an invisible hand prevents him from abandoning his vocation, and he is forced to endure a dark night of the soul. Eventually, the dawn delivers him. 'But for some there is no dawn,' the Narrator concludes, 'only the light / Of the Cross burning up the long aisle / of night; and for some there is not even that.'

'Evans' (1958), one of Thomas's most famous early poems, written after he had left Manafon, offers another preliminary example of the transcendental, indeed almost supernatural, role the night plays in his imagination. It provides a vivid sense of the ways in which Thomas's conception of darkness, of the materiality and spirituality of the night, are central to what Roland Barthes might have called his 'existential thematics'.[6] Here, Thomas describes his pastoral visits to a dying hill farmer. These visits, the speaker reports in the first stanza, concluded with him descending the 'bare flight / Of stairs' from his parishioner's bedroom and stepping out 'into the cold / Dark to smother in the thick tide / Of night that drifted about the walls / Of his stark farm on the hill ridge'. Night, in this poem, is more than a temporality; it is a fifth element. The speaker moves about in it as in a clammy, nightmarish current of something that, in its uncanny materiality, is denser than both air and water. In the second and final stanza, the poet offers a reflective coda:

> It was not the dark filling my eyes
> And mouth appalled me; not even the drip
> Of rain like blood from the one tree
> Weather-tortured. It was the dark
> Silting the veins of that sick man
> I left stranded upon the vast
> And lonely shore of his bleak bed. (CP 74)

'Perhaps one day,' Michel Foucault once reflected [OK?], 'we should ask ourselves what, in a culture like ours, might signify the prestige of the Vigil, of wide open eyes

that admit yet ward off the night'.[78] Evans, in his mortal illness, has, in Foucault's terms, admitted the night: it slowly infiltrates his body, in the form of a fatal, miasmic infection; it silently rises around his bed, like a tidal estuary thick with alluvial mud. He has failed to ward it off; and so has the priest, whose ritual attempts to exorcise it at the man's bedside, or at least to offer him spiritual comfort, have proved so futile that they remain pointedly unmentioned in the poem. The word 'appalled', in this second stanza, beyond simply signalling the poet's silent horror at the scene he has escaped, signifies both that, paradoxically, the dark creeping into him through the openings in his face makes him pale, as its etymology suggests, and that it cloaks him like the pall that might cover a corpse. Thomas's fear of death is so palpable in this poem it can be tasted on the tongue.

The domestic scene this poem describes is so grimly unremitting in its refusal to offer consolation that it risks seeming completely godless. It is apparently presided over not by the Christian God, let alone Christ himself, whose absence is distantly, ironically evoked by that image of the tortured tree, but by some far more ancient deity: Night perhaps in its primordial form; Night the daughter of Chaos that, in his *Theogony*, the ancient poet Hesiod identifies as Nyx. The speaker therefore flees, 'dark filling [his] eyes / And mouth,' as if fearing that he too will be afflicted by the dark silting the farmer's veins, or buried alive alongside him. For this fifth element, if it is thicker and more sluggish than air and water, is more fluid than earth. The poem shocks the reader because it appears brutally to contradict the philanthropic impulse that the bucolic priest is supposed to embody, confirming Thomas's frank admission, in an interview conducted more than forty years later, that since childhood he had suffered from a 'lack of love for human beings'.[9] In this dark, desolate landscape, which even seems to infiltrate the intimate interior of Evans's home, where a 'black kettle' whines like a vindictive wind, the isolated poet is comparable to the 'wanderer in the night' glimpsed in the passage from *The Minister* I have already cited. In 'Evans', one of Thomas's bleakest poems, the poet is like a character that has escaped from one of Beckett's fictions.

In a later, more redemptive poem, 'Night Sky' (1978), as if still pondering 'Evans', Thomas pictures the night, in its emptiness and pureness, cleansing and disinfecting him: 'Every night / is a rinsing myself of the darkness // that is in my veins' (334). The stars 'inject [him] / with fire', 'cauterising' his despair. This night too surely retains certain pagan associations. Its constellations, as he put it later in

'Preference', are comprised of 'the stars / that made shapes before / language began' (156). This night, which thus precedes the Word, inoculates him against death. The poet uses this night to ward off the night. Thomas, as these poems indicate, was delicately alive both to the spiritual consolations of insomnia, however tough these were to achieve, and to the mental and physical trials that religious and secular prophets of this condition, from the Old Testament to the present, have tended to dramatise. 'When I lie down, I say, When Shall I arise, and the night be gone?' Job explains, 'and I am full of tossings to and fro unto the dawning of the day' (Job 7: 4). Thomas, mindful of this tradition of portraying insomnia as the embodiment of an existence apparently without exit, deployed sleeplessness as the exemplary site, sometimes agonistic, sometimes calm and peaceful, of his relationship to a God who is at once present and absent.

In 'Shadows' (1978), Thomas insists as he addresses God with closed eyes that 'The darkness implies your presence' (CP 343). His poetry at the same time admits and wards off the night, to recall Foucault's terms. In 'Preference', a poem from the late collection *Mass for Hard Times* (1992), the poet narrates his experience of night terrors: 'I have wakened in the night, / my hair rising at the passing / of presences that were not human'. Here is an echo of Job 4, where Job wrestles with 'thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth on men': 'Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up' (Job 4: 13, 15). In spite of the electrifying fear evoked in 'Preference', though, Thomas confesses that, after turning on the artificial light in order to illuminate the 'articles / and upholstery' in his room, he has promptly turned it off – 'in preference for the dark places / to the certainty of our domestication' (CLP 156). The poet's eyes, wide open in the sleepless night, are alert to the spiritual possibilities that – occluded in the banal domestic circumstances of everyday life, which is conducted in the disenchanting conditions of artificial light – are secreted in the darkness. Ultimately, the night seems already to be inside Thomas. It is in his interior. Part of the force of his verse, in fact, resides in the way the poet struggles with what, in a different context, Foucault refers to as 'the fragment of darkness that we each carry within us'.[10] In his poems Thomas fingers this fragment with an almost gruesome fascination.

The eponymous priest in *The Minister* at one point characterized himself, ironically enough, as 'the lamp which the elders chose / To thaw the darkness that had congealed / About the hearts of the hill folk' (CP 46). But the poem is also about the

piece of night that is lodged like blackened shrapnel in the priest's soul. Thomas's poetry, to appropriate Eliot's famous remarks about Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, 'is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt'. Its faith seems at times a rather poor thing, 'but its doubt is a very intense experience'. A poem such as 'Evans' – like *In Memoriam* itself, which manifestly influenced Thomas – 'is a poem of despair, but of despair of a religious kind.'[11] In the address he delivered at Thomas's Memorial in Westminster Abbey in 2001, Seamus Heaney perceptively remarked that his *Collected Poems* was 'confirmation of the efforts of W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, his great predecessors in the attempt to write a religious poetry in an unreligious time'.[12]

Thomas's repeated meditations on what he depicts, in his admiring poem about Wallace Stevens, as 'the deep spaces between stars', reveal that, as a priest who 'preferred black', he was the poet laureate, in the second half of the twentieth century, of what Eliot called despair of the religious kind. 'Never known as anything / but an absence,' Thomas writes in 'Adjustments' (1978), 'I dare not name him / as God' (345). Stevens and Eliot, 'in quite different ways,' as Mark Jarman has commented in relation to Thomas, 'are preoccupied with the nature of an absent or present God.'[13] A number of critics have observed that, especially from the collections published in the 1970s on, Thomas's God is, identifiably, a *Deus absconditus*, a hidden God who transcends human understanding. 'As a poet attracted by mysticism,' the philosopher D.Z. Phillips has claimed, Thomas is 'absorbed in the struggle of mediating the sense of a *Deus absconditus*, a hidden God, in language.'[14]

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It is no doubt this commitment to the idea of a God whose presence cannot be detected except in the traces of his absence that has led some commentators to

underline Thomas's proximity to atheism. John Barnie has for instance characterised Thomas as 'a man struggling to retain a faith in God in the face of the evidence available to him from the material world'.[17] But some of the poet's own statements defending the contradictory unity of his dual roles as poet and priest, such as his Shelleyan claim, in a BBC documentary broadcast in 1972, that 'Christ was a poet, the New Testament is a metaphor, the Resurrection is a metaphor,' and, furthermore, that 'poetry is religion, religion is poetry', seem to reinforce this impression.[18] To appropriate a phrase he used in order to justify some of his more anomalous, or perhaps simply capacious, inclusions as editor of *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse* (1963), which he admitted might make him susceptible to 'charges of humanism and pantheism', it is certain that Thomas sat 'somewhat loosely to orthodoxy'.[19]

Thomas's clearest and most demonstrative articulation of his relationship to a present-absent God is probably 'Via Negativa' (1972). It opens with this apparently calm, perhaps fatalistic expression of spiritual resignation:

> Why no! I never thought other than
> That God is that great absence
> In our lives, the empty silence
> Within, the place where we go
> Seeking, not in hope to
> Arrive or find. (CP 220)

This poem's title explicitly invokes the example of negative theology, a school of thought that originated in ancient Neo-Platonic philosophers, most famously Pseudo-Dionysius, but which subsequently flourished among mediaeval mystics such as Meister Eckhart, who opposed an anthropomorphic understanding of God and identified him as 'a not-God, a not-spirit, a not-person, a not-image.'[20] This so-called apophatic tradition, as distinct from a cataphatic one, is premised on the assumption that it is not possible to make positive statements about the Divinity. 'His are the echoes / We follow,' Thomas continues in 'Via Negativa', 'the footprints he has just / Left' (CP 220). But if the tone here is one of melancholic acceptance, that opening exclamation – 'Why no!' – is rather more combative. Its impatient, intemperate, almost excessively emphatic tone seems to express frustration not simply with some

actual or imagined interlocutor but, consciously or unconsciously, with the God that remains so resolutely hidden.

As Thomas's investment in the tradition of the *via negativa* indicates, he was a poet who fought against and repeatedly reflected on the temptation, as he puts it in *The Minister*, to play 'the old anthropomorphic game' (CP 45). In 'Emerging' (1978), for example, he refers to the mind, in contrast to the poet's imagination, which is all too susceptible to the appeal of prosopopoeia, as 'sceptical as always / of the anthropomorphisms / of the fancy' (CP 355). Thomas was increasingly contemptuous of attempts to humanise God, because rather than in spite of the fact that, as a poet, he was almost by definition compelled to find concrete rather than abstract metaphors for portraying him. God, he insisted in *Mass for Hard Times,* is a ubiquitous 'presence' that one accidentally and only indirectly encounters, as opposed to some quasi-human entity that one might address directly. 'God happens,' Rowan William writes in a characteristically sensitive essay on Thomas, 'when we are not looking for God'.[21] In the verse from *Mass for Hard Times* to which I have been referring, which is in the end no more than half-successful in its efforts to achieve the requisite equilibrium between concrete and abstract, Thomas emphasises that God is a presence 'whose margins are our margins; / that calls us out over our / own fathoms' (CLP 118). These margins, where God and humans indirectly coincide, like echoes of echoes, like footprints fitted into footprints left on a snow-covered field, enact the logic of the double negative according to which the intersection or superimposition of two absences generates a mysterious dialectical presence. For Thomas, Williams comments, 'we and our world are internal to the mathematics of God's mind.'[22]

In the course of the interview he gave shortly before his death in 2000, confirming his persistent refusal of the temptation to anthropomorphise God, Thomas approvingly quoted the older North-American poet Robinson Jeffers: 'the people who talk of God in human terms, think of that!' Gently but forcefully, he then chided George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins, both poet-priests, for the more or less erotic overtones that, according to him, distorted their excessively intimate, personal investment in God:

> George Herbert, the seventeenth-century divine and poet, must have been a dear man, but when he speaks of the touch of the Lord pressing against his soul, I simply can't conceive of God in that way. As for Gerard Manley Hopkins and the sort of endearments he uses, it's

almost as if he had a sexual relationship with God. No, loving God is too much of a human construct. What there must be is awe.[23]

In some respects, Thomas here misrepresents Herbert in particular. In his earlier 'Introduction' to *A Choice of George Herbert's Verse* (1967), he had been far more sympathetic to the seventeenth-century poet's attempt to demonstrate 'both the possibility and the desirability of a friendship with God', if still sceptical of it. 'Friendship is no longer the right way to describe it,' he had underlined; 'The word now is dialogue, encounter, confrontation.'[24] By comparison, in the rather dismissive comments that he made in the interview conducted more than three decades later, he underestimated the fact that, as S.J. Perry perceptively points out, in reality Herbert's verse 'expresses a struggle with doubt, and an awareness of the unfathomable distance that lies between man and God which, in many ways, anticipates those expressions of absence and spiritual estrangement that we encounter in Thomas's poetry.' But, if he misinterprets Herbert in thus implicitly disavowing him as a precursor, his 'gradual movement away from the Anglican theology associated with Herbert,' as Perry adds, 'can be seen to reflect both his increasing inability to conceive of God in anthropological terms and the emphasis that his later poetry places on the tremendous difficulty of coming into contact with the divine.'[25]

In his career-long pursuit of a concrete, corporeal poetic language capable of representing his relationship to God in all its urgency and vitality without at the same time betraying its irreducibly abstract, spiritual quality, Thomas found intellectual encouragement in the thinking of the influential German-American theologian Paul Tillich. In the first volume of his *Systematic Theology* (1951), which Thomas probably first read in the early to mid 1960s, at about the time it was popularised in Britain by J.A.T. Robinson's book *Honest to God* (1963), Tillich developed his notion of God as the 'ground of being'. 'Many confusions in the doctrine of God and many apologetic weaknesses could be avoided,' he emphasised, 'if God were understood first of all as being-itself or as the ground of being'. God, Tillich insisted, was 'being-itself, not *a* being'.[26] Thomas praised this precept explicitly in an interview he gave in 1983: 'I do like Tillich's idea of the Ground of Being, that God is not a being.'[27] The three volumes of *Systematic Theology* were on Thomas's bookshelves when he died; and, as Tony Brown has revealed, although they were only very lightly annotated, he had deliberately marked one passage in which Tillich argues that 'if the notion of God

appears in systematic theology in correlation with the threat of non-being which is implied in existence, God must be called the infinite power of being which resists the threat of non-being.'[28]

Even before his discovery of Tillich, however, Thomas was fairly militant in his campaign to undermine sentimental, anthropomorphic conceptions of the Christian deity. His language is throughout his life as a poet informed by philosophical concepts of being and non-being, even if he doesn't use an overtly existentialist vocabulary. In his *Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, a distinctly mischievous and provocative volume, he divided the poems he had decided to anthologise – which, according to an agreement with the publisher, he deliberately didn't organise chronologically – into five sections. To each of these he gave a formidably abstract title, namely God, Self, Nothing, It, and All. In his revealing 'Introduction', Thomas glosses these titles, respectively, as 'the consciousness of God, of the self, of negation, of the impersonal or un-nameable, and of completion'. As he goes on to explain, he was conscious that, of these sections, '"It", "Nothing", and "Self" may be more controversial', principally perhaps because, more than 'God' and 'All', they 'broaden the meaning of the term "religious" to accommodate twentieth-century sensibility'.[29]

In 'History' (1986), to offer an example of this from his own oeuvre, he allegorises the evening of civilisation, its decline or dusk in the late twentieth century, in these prophetic terms:

<blockquote>
As the sun went down
the lights came on in a million
laboratories, as the scientists attempted
to turn the heart's darkness into intellectual play. (CP 510)
</blockquote>

Here, as in 'Preference' and a number of his other poems, artificial light functions as an emblem of the Enlightenment and its scientistic, technocratic settlement. The present constitutes what he calls, in *Counterpoint* (1990), 'the twilight / of our reason' (CLP 124). As his poetry repeatedly makes clear, Thomas was passionately committed to protecting Nature's reputation from the depredations of what, in political rhetoric that was calculatedly simplistic, he called the Machine. In retrospect, therefore, he might fruitfully be regarded, among other things, as an environmentalist

poet: a poet of a post-Romantic ecology. He was also, as this perhaps implies, a type of Romantic anti-capitalist, one who pitted the landscape, as a repository of traces of the absent-present deity, against the logic of alienation and reification characteristic of industrial and post-industrial modernity. His compatriot Raymond Williams might almost have cited Thomas in the final chapter of *The Country and the City* (1973), where he reflects on his own relationship to the Welsh landscape and its social and political contours.

In the *Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, Thomas's selection of Jeffers's 'Hooded Night', which features in the section entitled 'It', is especially indicative of his covertly apocalyptic attitude to contemporary history. Jeffers, who died shortly before the anthology appeared in print, was an important presence for Thomas, who later emphasised that he had been 'much influenced by him'.[30] 'Hooded Night', first published in 1928, imparts a quietly cataclysmic tone to the anthology: 'At night, toward dawn, all the lights of the shore have died, / And a wind moves. Moves in the dark…'. The poem evokes a primal landscape or seascape that, in contrast to the 'spectral episode' enacted by humanity's destructive activities, represents 'reality'. It concludes: 'After the inquisitive animal's / Amusements are quiet: the dark glory'.[31] Thomas evidently admired both the setting of this poem and its anti-humanist impulse, which is distilled with some neatness in the title of the section in which he inserted it: 'It'. These features find echoes among many other poems anthologised in this part of the *Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, which includes several Romantics as well as contemporaries such as Kathleen Raine and Anne Ridler. Above all, perhaps, it resonates here alongside section LVI of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), the one in which, famously, the Victorian poet laureate portrays Nature, 'red in tooth and claw', as savagely careless both of human and divine values.[32]

It is the section entitled 'Nothing', though, which Thomas paraphrases as 'negation', that is at the centre of the collection. This is evident not simply because, in terms of the book's architecture, it is flanked on either side by two other sections; nor because it is the only section with a disyllabic as opposed to a monosyllabic title. It is the last section for which, in the final paragraph of his 'Introduction', he offers a rationale. There, he invokes the desolation and isolation of a state of spiritual doubt, citing Gerard Manley Hopkins' so-called 'terrible' sonnets, and identifying them as 'but a human repetition of the cry from the Cross: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!"' – 'My God, my God, Why hast thou forsaken me?' He adds:

> The ability to be in hell is a spiritual prerogative, and proclaims the true nature of such a being. Without darkness, in the world we know, the light would go unprized; without evil, goodness would have no meaning. Over every poet's door is nailed Keats's saying about negative capability. Poetry is born of the tensions set up by the poet's ability to be 'in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.[33]

Darkness and evil; doubts and uncertainties… These are at the core of religious experience for Thomas, and of the poetic representation of this experience. His verse, and his Kierkegaardian faith, revolves constantly, silently, around a central void. As he puts it retrospectively in one of the lyrics that comprise *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988), one of his last volumes of poetry, 'An obsession with nothing / distinguished him from his co- / thinkers' (CLP 35).

At one point in his 'Introduction' to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, Thomas offers tentative, capacious definitions both of religion and poetry. The former 'embrac[es] an experience of ultimate reality'; the latter is 'the imaginative presentation of such'. He goes on to explain that the existence of an 'ultimate reality beyond human attainment, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*' is 'the common ground between religion and poetry'. And he discriminates between the mystic, to whom 'the *Deus absconditus* is immediate', and the poet, to whom 'He is mediated':

> The mystic fails to mediate God adequately insofar as he is not a poet. The poet, with possibly less immediacy of apprehension, shows his spiritual concern and spiritual nature through the medium of language, the supreme symbol.[34]

The purity of the mystic's apprehension of the absent God, Thomas implies, renders his experience incommunicable. What, then, of the poet? Here he seems to hesitate. Is it because of the impurity of his experience of the absent God that he is able to communicate it in language? Or is it because, in contrast to the solitary mystic, the poet is able to use language to communicate with others that his experience of the absent God is necessarily compromised?

For Thomas, implicitly, this remains an open question. And his identity, too, seems to remain unresolved. He is both a poet and, less certainly, a mystic: a poet in so far as he heroically mediates God through language; and a mystic in so far as, tragically, his verse dramatises the impossibility of mediating God through language.

It is the choice between, on the one hand, speaking a language that, because it is language, inevitably betrays its object, not least by constituting it as an object; and, on the other hand, relinquishing language altogether. Language or silence... The apparent modesty of Thomas's poems, which are for the most part unambitious in scale, and which tend to be characterised by a tone both diffident and defiant, are a testament to this dilemma. So is the fact that they seem at the same time occasional, even provisional, and meticulously constructed, highly finished – like shells or stones that a beachcomber has taken home and polished with exquisite care.[35] In their claims both to permanency and impermanency, the poems are symptoms of an irreconcilable opposition. They are not so much a compromise between the idea that God's presence can be mediated and the idea that he cannot, as a sort of 'compromise-formation', in Freudian terms, 'in which both trends have found an incomplete expression'.[36]

Thomas's verse in one sense embodies the 'tragic vision' that the philosopher Lucien Goldmann outlined in relation to seventeenth-century French literature, in that it is testament to the premise that 'the only person to whom tragic man can address his words or ideas is God, but this God, as we know, is dumb and absent and never replies.'[37] Thomas's attitude to this assumption, however, some three centuries later, is ironic rather than tragic. God's present absence and absent presence is a source of agonising frustration for Thomas, as he struggles to find spiritual meaning through poetry and prayer; but it also inspires an attitude of fatalistic detachment that almost amounts to amusement.

According to the logic of negative theology, God's absence testifies, in Thomas's verse, at least potentially, to his presence. The empty space that encompasses the poet's being is so comprehensive that it contains the hitherto unfulfilled promise of a filled space that is absolute in its completion. If God 'scorches with sparks of blood', Thomas explains in *The Echoes Return Slow*, then he 'glaciates' him, at the same time, 'in the draught out of his tomb' (CLP 42). The divine is perceived on the one hand in these scintillas and, on the other, in the void. It is a dialectics of presence and absence, heat and cold, inside and outside, the infinitesimal and the infinite.

'The Absence' (1978), from *Frequencies*, exemplifies Thomas's apophatic poetics. It explores approximately the same problem as 'Via Negativa':

It is this great absence

> that is like a presence, that compels
>
> me to address it without hope
>
> of a reply. (CP 361)

In an attempt to render the abstract immensity of God more concrete, Thomas compares his presence to 'a room I enter // from which someone has just / gone' (361). God is not an imperceptible presence so much as a perceptible absence. The line breaks here mimic the silent, but secretly violent, albeit extremely ordinary activities of entering and leaving the room. These caesuras, so characteristic of the rhythms that shape Thomas's poetry, register the poet's unconscious hesitation on the threshold of the room, as he intuits an almost imperceptible departure. The poet intrudes on an empty space that, the precise moment after God has vacated it, is mysteriously sanctified in spite of its ordinariness. God is a faint, if not undetectable, disturbance of the room's atmosphere. He is a Holy Ghost. Struggling with this apophatic theology, the poet admits that his words 'fail'. 'What resource have I,' he asks, 'other than the emptiness without him of my whole / being, a vacuum he may not abhor?' (CP 361).

In 'Which', from *Laboratories of the Spirit* (1975), to offer another example of the dialectic of absence and presence in Thomas's verse, the poet lifts his head in order to ascertain whether, as the pious book he reads insists is the case, 'God is love' (CP 297). But he is forced to conclude, grimly, 'I do not find it / so' (CP 297). The divinity, he discovers, does not reside in the 'air', which is 'heavy with the scent / of this one word' – presumably 'love', possibly 'God' itself (CP 297). No, he is absent, and the air is in actual fact vacant. Language, in consequence, like the book he discards, cannot be trusted. Instead, only 'the blows that / life gives [him]' offer intimations of the absent deity (CP 297). So the poet must find a means of using language, as the medium to which he is necessarily condemned, to register these shocks administered by an absent force, rather than to indicate directly the deity's presence. God is thus present not in the poem's language so much as in the silences between the lines, which are equivalent to what, in 'Via Negativa', he calls 'the interstices / In our knowledge, the darkness / Between stars' (CP 220). Indeed, it is partly for this reason that line endings, often gently interrupting sense, play such an important role in Thomas's poetry: they draw attention to the spaces between lines, between words, between stanzas, between poems. In short, they make the non-

language of the blank page exert a kind of invisible pressure on the language on the page. In the empty spaces on the page, which constitute a silence, God can be apprehended as an absent presence; in the black print, he is perceptible as a present absence.

It is above all in the night, I think, when space and time are at their emptiest, that Thomas's God becomes perceptible in his imperceptibility: 'the darkness / Between stars.' The night becomes a privileged site for an encounter with God that is intimate in spite of his irreducible abstraction. 'At night,' writes Thomas in 'Alive', the poem that precedes 'Which' in *Laboratories of the Spirit*, 'if I waken, / there are the sleepless conurbations of the stars' (CP 296). Here is Thomas in the still, vast space of the night. His use of the faintly archaic-sounding word 'waken' here, as opposed to the expected word 'awaken', transmits a subliminal shock to the reader that, because of this missing beat, mimics the moment at which the sleeper, susceptible perhaps to the slow-motion dislocation or declension with which a dream can slide to its end, suddenly but subtly comes to consciousness.

Above the poet, probably visible from his window, are the constellations. The 'sleepless conurbations of the stars' here recall the 'lidless-eyed train / Of planets' towards which Keats raises his 'sight right upward' in *Endymion* (1818).[38] But, in addition to multiplying and scattering the stars, by scintillating the planets, so to speak, the image enacts a startling inversion. Like nature and culture, heaven and earth have exchanged places here. Instead of looking up at the constellations, the poet appears to be looking from above at the distant artificial lights of conurbations after dark. As the poet shifts from a state of unconsciousness to one of consciousness, the cosmos seems to tilt on its axis, so that the blinking lights of unsleeping cities now prick out the dense canopy of the immense night sky. The 'darkness' in which, on awakening in the night, the poet finds himself immersed in 'Alive', which directly addresses God, 'is the deepening shadow / of your presence; the silence a / process in the metabolism / of the being of love' (CP 296). For Augustine and Aquinas, the theologian Catherine Pickstock has argued, 'negativity introduces us to a mysterious and yet palpable darkness, which in refusing our analysis still welcomes us.'[39] Thomas's notion of the negative is recognisably a descendent of this tradition.

In 'The Possession', from *Frequencies* (1978), published the year Thomas retired from the priesthood, he depicts the night sky, which he sees when 'rising from his fused prayers', as 'the illuminated city / above him'. 'I am nothing religious,' this

poem continues; 'All I have is a piece / of the universal mind that reflects / infinite darkness between points of light'.[40] Here, again, to frame it in Foucault's terms, is the fragment of darkness that, as a human being, Thomas carries inside him. 'Is the night dark?' Thomas asks in 'The Moment', from *Later Poems* (1983); he responds, 'His interiors / are darker, more perilous / to enter' (CP 430). These interiors, identified with an ambiguous possessive pronoun, seem to be those of both God and the poet. The fragment of darkness lodged inside the poet, for its part, is something like a shard of glass whose blank, black surface mirrors the empty night sky. It is 'a piece / of the universal mind that reflects / infinite darkness'; a 'possession', that is, not in the sense of an owning but a haunting. It thus registers the invisible presence of God as an absence. 'In times / like these and for one like me,' he speculates in 'Pilgrimages' (1981), 'God will never be plain and / out there, but dark rather and / inexplicable, as though he were in here' (CP 364).

Thomas is best seen not as a sort of post-theistic priest, as some critics have implicitly characterised him, but as a Pascalian poet. Pascal was a thinker who felt compelled, as both a Christian and one of the most brilliant scientists of his time, to come to terms with the fact that, in seventeenth-century Europe, in an epoch irreversibly shaped by Cartesian assumptions, God no longer appeared directly to humanity. God had disappeared, instead, into the infinite spaces conceptualised by rationalist science, a phenomenon that Pascal referred to in the fourth of his *Provincial Letters* (1657) as the 'strange secret of God's withdrawal from and concealment in the sentient world'.[41] As this necessarily crude outline already indicates, the idea of the *Deus absconditus*, premised on the assumption 'that men are in darkness and remote from God, [and] that he has hidden himself from their understanding', was absolutely central to Pascal's Jansenist thought.[42] The *Pensées* (1670), which Thomas read and annotated, therefore offer to teach us much about his attempt, in the different though not entirely discontinuous circumstances of twentieth-century Europe, to conduct a solitary dialogue with a God who is both absent and present. Thomas was a kind of Jansenist in his turn away from the world and towards a hidden, watchful God.

In his superb study of Pascal, published in 1955, Goldmann identified him as someone for whom the Deity 'is always absent and always present'. For Pascal, as Goldmann summarises it, 'God always exists but never appears'.[43] This flickering dialectic of presence and absence structures the logic of Pascal's celebrated wager,

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which is predicated on the idea of God's absolute unknowability. 'If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension, since, being indivisible and without limits, he bears no relation to us,' Pascal writes in the *Pensées*; 'We are therefore incapable of knowing either what he is or whether he is.' In the face of this situation, Pascal argues, 'you must wager' on whether or not God exists. He goes on to calculate the stakes of this gamble:

> Let us weigh up the gain and the loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything; if you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then; wager that he does exist.[44]

Thomas also wagers that God exists. But the consequence of living simultaneously in the absence and presence of God, of staking everything on the belief 'that God can and may appear at any moment of man's life, although He never actually does so', is that he too is condemned to what Goldmann identifies, in the context of the seventeenth century, as the agonies and the ecstasies of a 'tragic vision'. Thomas's relationship to God, like Pascal's, is constitutively shaped by what Goldmann calls 'tragic tension', an existential condition that entails 'the perpetual movement from being to nothingness and from presence to absence'.[45] Thomas's spiritual dilemma is that of the 'tragic man', who is forced to confront the fact that, finally, 'man is alone, placed between a blind world and a hidden and a silent God.'[46] His poems, like Pascal's philosophical annotations, are a record of this solitary relationship with an implacably absent God.

Although Thomas 'rarely made marks or notes in the margins of the books he read', as the critic Tony Brown has observed from the archives, he nonetheless scored a 'firm line' beside the following passage from his copy of the *Pensées*. Here, in order to condemn those who doubt but do not seek, Pascal ventriloquises the voice of an 'unreasonable' man who boasts 'that we are in impenetrable darkness':

> 'I know not who put me into the world, nor what the world is, nor what I myself am. I am in terrible ignorance of everything. I know not what my body is, nor my senses, nor my soul, not even that part of me which thinks what I say, which reflects on all and on itself, and knows itself no more than the rest. I see those frightful spaces of the universe which surround me, and I find myself tied to one corner of this vast expanse, without knowing why I am put in this place rather than in another, nor why the short time which is given me to live is assigned to

me at this point than at another of the whole eternity which was before me or which shall come after me. I see nothing but infinites on all sides, which surround me as an atom, and as a shadow which endures only for an instant and returns no more.'[47]

It is implicitly apparent that, like Pascal perhaps, a part of Thomas, inadmissibly, empathises with this position. In his copy of the 1931 Everyman edition of the *Pensées*, as Brown also helpfully notes, Thomas altered Pascal's sentence, 'The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me,' which is spoken in his own voice rather than that of the 'unreasonable' man he has fabricated, so that it reads instead: 'The eternal silence of these infinite spaces appals me.'[48] This subtle, seemingly unnecessary adjustment to W.F. Trotter's translation registers Thomas's emotional investment. The associations of this verb with claustrophobic darkness that Thomas had transmitted to the reader in 'Evans', where 'the dark / Silting the veins' of the sick man leaves the poet, 'appalled', here resurface to agoraphobic effect.

In his Introduction to the Everyman edition of the *Pensées* that Thomas owned and read, T.S. Eliot conceded that 'Pascal's disillusioned analysis of human bondage is sometimes interpreted to mean that Pascal was really and finally an unbeliever, who, in his despair, was incapable of enduring reality and enjoying the free man's worship of nothing.' This interpretation is erroneous though. 'His despair, his disillusion,' Eliot insists, are 'no illustration of personal weakness; they are perfectly objective, because they are essential moments in the progress of the intellectual soul; and for the type of Pascal they are the analogue of the drought, the dark night, which is an essential stage in the progress of the Christian mystic.' Thomas's despair, which itself bears a superficial resemblance to that of an 'unbeliever', is also best understood as comparable to the 'dark night' that, in Eliot's terms once more, 'was a necessary prelude to, and element in, the joy of faith.'[49] For Thomas, though, this despair endlessly deferred the joy of faith; the day never fully dawned. 'Travelling towards the light,' he wrote in the title poem of *Destinations* (1985), 'we were waylaid by darkness' (CP 456).

In 'The Flower', from *Laboratories of the Spirit*, the poet resides 'in a soundless darkness / in the shadow of your regard' (CP 280). This empty, implicitly nocturnal space, consisting of 'the earth, the sea, the immensity', is at the same time a vacuum and a sort of sensorium in which God might negatively be divined. For Thomas, the night is, so to speak, a specialist laboratory of the spirit. Its origins as

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such can perhaps be discerned in a routine experience that shaped his childhood. In 'Neb' (1985), an autobiographical essay written in the third person, Thomas described his relation to the sea, which was audible and visible from his childhood home in Holyhead, where the family had moved when he was five, in terms of a striking emblematic image: 'At night the flashes from the lighthouse would dart through his room like the sails of a windmill.'[50] The 'chronotope' of the night, if I can put it like that, the peculiar intersection of space and time that, for Thomas, constitutes the night as it is individually lived and represented, with its characteristic interplay of light and dark, is the site of apophatic experience that is almost, if not quite, mystical. Eliot insisted in his Introduction to the *Pensées* that 'Pascal was not a mystic, and his works are not to be classified as mystical writings, but what can only be called mystical experience happens to many men who do not become mystics.'[51] Thomas, as I have already intimated, is one of these men – as an early poem like 'The Moor', with its moving record of 'the mind's cession / Of its kingdom' in the face of an epiphanic encounter with a landscape, implies (CP 166). Religion, he insisted in 'A Frame for Poetry' (1966), has to do first of all with vision, revelation, and these are best told of in poetry.'[52]

Thomas's verse can be understood, I think, to have inherited the tradition of those Christians of various kinds who, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sought God in the night. It restlessly turns and returns to what Jacques Derrida has in his often illuminating meditations on negative theology described as 'the mystical Darkness where profane vision ceases' and a sacred vision commences.[53] As Craig Koslofsky has persuasively argued, during the period of religious division and spiritual uncertainty that followed the Reformation 'the night became more sacred and more meaningful as an unintended consequence of the persecution and clandestine worship attendant to confessional formation'.[54] In the sixteenth century, various Christian communities, including the Anabaptists and the Mennonites, invested the night with particular devotional significance because the Church authorities prevented them from freely worshipping their God in the light of day. In so doing, they fostered a faith that looked for inspiration to the biblical example of Nicodemus, a Pharisee who, as the Gospel of John records, 'came to Jesus by night' (John, 3: 2). 'In the sixteenth century,' Koslofsky observes, 'this obscure figure became the exemplar for Christians forced to seek the Lord at night.'[55]

At this time, too, in addition to sects like the Anabaptists, several influential Christian divines, including John of the Cross and Jakob Böhme, sanctified the night as a time of special spiritual importance. The former, for example, forced by political necessity to see the hours after dark as an opportunity for cloistered contemplation and communion, used his poetry to promote the night as the privileged symbol of a Christian's mystic relationship to the Creator: the dark night of the soul. As Koslofsky formulates it:

> John's references to 'the tranquil night, / at the time of the rising of the dawn, / the silent music and sounding solitude' reflect the many accounts of his excursions outside in the middle of the night with his companions to pray and observe the beauty of the heavens, as well as many nights spent in solitary prayer.[56]

Böhme, for his part, developing a theosophy 'intended to illuminate a world blinded by ecclesiastical authorities and confessional strife', paradoxically elevated darkness to a theological role comparable in its importance to that of light.[57] Indebted to Meister Eckhart, as well as to the alchemical tradition, he regarded Good and Evil, day and night, as complementary parts of the unity structuring God's Creation. 'His mystical cosmogony,' Elisabeth Bronfen confirms, 'is based on a mutual implication of light and darkness', for he saw both as manifestations of God.[58]

Contemporaneous with Böhme, several seventeenth-century English poets explored what Koslofsky has characterised as 'the apophatic night', the central principle of which is for him summed up by John of the Cross's insistence that 'the more the soul is darkened, the greater is the light that comes into it'.[59] Most important among these were John Donne, George Herbert, and the Welsh poet Henry Vaughan. In the first of Herbert's two poems entitled 'Even-song' (c.1620), the speaker identifies the Lord, once 'the day is spent', as the embodiment of 'Light & Darkness both together'. He envisages a sun that is 'darker than a Tree', and a God that is darker even than the sun.[60] But at this point Herbert applies an apophatic logic, arguing that light is God's darkness, and that if his own darkness touches God's darkness, a paradoxical kind of light will be created. Vaughan, who credited Herbert with his spiritual enlightenment, produced his purest meditation on the mystic potential of darkness in 'The Night' (c.1650). The impetus of this poem is John's account of Nicodemus's encounter with Jesus: 'Wise Nicodemus saw such light / As

made him know his God by night.' He adds that, miraculously, 'in that land of darkness and blind eyes' to which he was condemned, Nicodemus 'Did at mid-night speak with the Sun!' Inspired by this example, the poet dismisses the light of day and, in devising a splendid apophatic trope, expresses his desire for the night in which he might encounter God in all his 'deep, but dazzling darkness'.[61]

Donne's 'Nocturnal Upon St Lucy's Day' (1627) is set at midnight on the shortest day of the year, a moment that he identifies as that of the sun's 'vigil'. In this complicated, enigmatic poem, the poet among other things appears to apply the logic of the *via negativa* to love, evoking his relationship to the mysterious woman for whom he grieves through 'things which are not'. The poem's speaker declares that, because of the alchemy of love, he has been 're-begot / Of absence, darkness, death'. A primal nothingness prevails. 'But I am by her death (which word wrongs her),' the fourth stanza opens, 'Of the first nothing, the elixir grown'.[62] The 'appeal of annihilation,' as John Carey has pointed out, 'permeates' this poem, 'where Donne wills his return to a nothingness even more lost and blank than the original nothing that preceded Creation.' Thomas's cosmos, like Donne's in this poem, also often seems to be 'on the edge of nothingness', in Carey's phrase.[63] So does his self. The epigraph Thomas selected for his autobiographical essay 'Neb', which in the Welsh language means 'No One', is taken from the Roman-Catholic French poet Paul Claudel: 'Et de ce néant indestructible, qui est moi'.[64] And from this indestructible nothingness, which is me… Like Wallace Stevens, as Thomas put it in his poem about the American poet, the Welsh poetThomas

>   preferred black,
> The deep spaces between stars,
> Fathomless as the cold shadow
> His mind cast.
> (CP 135).

A theology of the night stands behind Thomas's emphasis on its spiritual importance. But insomnia also plays a peculiar role in the Christian tradition. And in order to grasp the poetics of sleeplessness glimpsed in Thomas's poetry, and to understand the spiritual tradition of which it is a part, it is necessary to begin at the beginning, in the shape of the God of Genesis. This God labours for six days, with no rest, in order to

create the world; 'And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he resteth on the seventh day from all his work which he had made' (Genesis 2: 2). Thomas implicitly pays tribute to this heroic display of sleeplessness when he asks, in one of the poems from *Counterpoint* (1990), 'Does a God sleep?' and responds, 'On that first night / The stars blinked ubiquitously as his eyelids' (CLP 84). In his unceasing act of Creation, the God of Genesis is an insomniac.

The God of Psalms too, in his omniscience and his eternal presence, seems to be an insomniac. Psalm 121, for example, declares that 'he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep' (Psalm 121: 4). The ever-vigilant eyes of God are open for eternity, according to the Psalmist: 'The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore' (121: 8). In 'Watching', published in the posthumous collection *Residues* (2002), Thomas observes that 'From two thousand years' / distance [God] watches us' (CLP 299). In the Psalms, this sleepless divinity demands or deserves a corresponding attentiveness or watchfulness from his people: 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help,' is the beautiful opening to Psalm 121 in the King James Version (121: 1). Psalm 123, for its part, compares the eyes of this people to 'the eyes of servants' looking expectantly 'unto the hand of their masters': 'so our eyes *wait* upon Lord our God' (Psalm 123: 3). Eyes that wait as well as watch are vigilant eyes. But at the same time, as Thomas writes in one of the lyrics of *The Echoes Return Slow*, God is a 'faceless negative' that perpetually exceeds our capacity to wait and watch for him: 'He is what escapes always / the vigilance of our lenses' (CLP 68).

It is the eternally insomniac God of the Psalms that John Henry Newman, who had suffered from sleeplessness, and an attendant crisis of spiritual confidence, during his illness in Sicily in 1833, apostrophizes in 'Sleep', one of the poems he contributed to *Lyra Apostolica* (1836): 'Unwearied God, before whose face / The night is clear as day'.[65] 'Sleep' is not really a poem about sleep but about sleeplessness; and sleeplessness of two kinds: God's and humanity's. If the former testifies to a serene and light-filled night, the latter testifies to one that is dark, febrile and nightmarish, although it also testifies, more positively, to a susceptibility to God's teachings. Newman characterizes earthly sleeplessness – in other words his own – as 'that fever-troubled state / When pain and care hold sway'. Notably, in the first draft of this poem, Newman addressed the deity as 'Sleepless God'. He altered the manuscript, as one commentator has observed, because 'unwearied', as an ascription, 'softened the

anthropomorphism'.[66] The attribution of sleeplessness risked conflating the poet's troubled, irreducibly personal state with God's untroubled, omniscient one.

In his discussion of the *Pensées*, Eliot concluded that he could 'think of no other Christian writer, not Newman even, more to be commended than Pascal to those who doubt, but who have the mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel, the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering, and who can only find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being'.[67] Thomas, whose theology also circles around disorder, futility and meaninglessness, can be added to this lineage. In 'The Other', from *Destinations* (1985), which is probably his most important poem about insomnia and the spiritual significance of the night, he invokes a God of sleeplessness comparable to Newman's; and, in communing with him, briefly achieves a relationship that promises, at least, 'peace through a satisfaction of the whole being'. In becoming the other of the divine Other, the poet – according to the logic of negative theology – achieves a certain spiritual unity. In 'The Other', the poet lies 'in the lean hours awake listening' to the sound of the Atlantic, the regular rhythms of which are pierced in the stillness by the occasional cries of nocturnal animals, when he becomes conscious of God's co-presence. Here, his relationship to God is at once intimate and utterly alien.

> There are nights that are so still
> that I can hear the small owl calling
> far off and a fox barking
> miles away. It is then that I lie
> in the lean hours awake listening …
> (CP 457)

Thomas's insomnia, which finds its objective correlative in 'the long shore / by the village, that is without light / and companionless', is far more serene than that of Evans, whose 'bleak bed', in his spiritual solitude, was a 'lonely shore'. It is more serene, too, than Newman's with its claustrophobic landscape. But both Newman's and Thomas's are desolate; and both discover the divine and human forms of sleeplessness mirroring one another, albeit asymmetrically, in the night. Thomas's insomniac state is not an active groping for comfort and companionship but a passive, receptive relationship defined by a kind of divine co-presence: 'that other being who is awake, too, / letting our prayers break on him'.

'The Other' is another of Thomas's 'laboratories of the spirit'. Once again, the night is both a vacuum, in which the poet finds himself suspended in time and space; and a sensorium, in which he feels attuned to the systole and diastole of the sea in the distance and, far closer, to the rise and fall of the waves on the shore. This circular, repetitious rhythm is reflected in the poem's numerous internal rhymes and half-rhymes, especially of words that contain a double 'l' ('still', 'small', 'calling', 'swell', 'falling'), which create a subtle rippling effect on the page as well as echoes, and fainter echoes within these echoes, when the lines are read aloud. The reader, too, in other words, is enveloped in the nocturnal landscape or seascape that the poet experiences, on some almost physiological level, as he lies sleepless in the still night. It is in this calm state of attenuation that 'the thought comes / of that other being who is awake, too'. This other sleepless being, the poet emphasizes, is 'not like this for a few hours, / but for days, years, for eternity'.

'The Other' is the record of a sleepless spiritual state that patently inherits the tradition of the apophatic night descending from John of the Cross. But if the poem evokes a 'tranquil night', in the saint's formulation, one that is characterised by 'silent music and sounding solitude', it nonetheless hints, in spite of its apparently pacific atmosphere, at a dark night of the soul. The poet's isolation and loneliness, in the 'lean hours' as he lies 'awake listening', is clear enough; his anguish is more coded. It is signalled by the presence of the fox and the owl in the opening lines, animals whose primal cries, though muted by distance, unsettle the night's peace. Certainly, the owls that can at times be glimpsed as pale-faced, spectral forms in Thomas's landscapes are minatory presences, full of enigmatic significance. In 'Barn Owl' (1977), for example, the raptor, or crypto-raptor, 'is soft / feathers camouflaging a machine'. Its call is a 'night-strangled cry'. Repeating itself 'year / after year in its offspring', transmitting its genetic code to generation after generation, this inhuman noise 'is the voice / of God in the darkness cursing himself / fiercely for his lack of love' (CP 319). It is also, of course, the voice of the poet, cursing himself fiercely for his own lack of love. If God is the Other, here and in 'The Other', then the poet is the other of the Other.

Thomas reprinted 'The Other' in *The Echoes Return Slow*, making very slight variations to its punctuation and prefacing it, like all the poems in this late volume, with a short, elliptical piece of prose:

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Minerva's bird, Athene noctua; too small for wisdom, yet unlike its tawnier cousin active by day, too, its cat's eyes bitterer than the gorse petals. But at night it was lyrical, its double note sounded under the stars in counterpoint to the fall of the waves. (CLP 51)

More echoes, then, returning slow – in the form of double notes doubling the rhythm of the waves… Here, the so-called little owl, named after Athene, Greek goddess of wisdom, and Minerva, her Roman counterpart, makes a lyrical noise at night; but its bitter cat's eyes, active in the light as well as in the dark, seem sinister. This owl also, ominously, recalls the owl referred to in the prefatory paragraph to one of the poems that appears earlier in the same volume. In confessional tones, these sentences conclude: 'dark thoughts come to the priest in the church porch art night, with the owl calling, or later at his bedside' (CLP 30). The cry of the predatory owl portends the priest's dark night of the soul. In 'Raptor', from *No Truce with the Furies* (1995), the poet pictures God himself as 'an enormous owl / abroad in the shadows': sometimes he feels its wing brush against him, 'so the blood in my veins freezes'; sometimes he hears it scream, as it fastens its talons in someone like him (CLP 256).

'Night after night I point my hands / at the sky,' the poem accompanying this prose piece opens: 'a launching pad / for my prayers to take off for their orbiting / in immense space'. It continues:

> What listener
> is this, who is always awake
> and says nothing? His breathing
> is the rising and falling of oceans on remote
> stars.
>
> (CLP 30)

As in 'The Other', God in this poem is a silent insomniac whose eternal sleeplessness, cosmic in its scale, promises to redeem the restlessness of the priest. Thomas thus affirms what Derrida, as against 'dogmatic somnambulism', describes as 'apophatic vigilance'.[68]

In 'Waiting', one of the sermons that Tillich collected in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (1949), the theologian takes as his first text two verses from Psalm 130:

I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope.

Here is a vigil for the day to come, in Foucault's phrase. The psalmist waits in a state of spiritual sleeplessness for what Tillich calls 'the breaking in of eternity'. This condition is comparable to the physical and mental sleeplessness of the insomniac, but it entails an active rather than a passive disposition. It is not without anguish though. If 'both the Old and the New Testaments describe our existence in relation to God as one of waiting,' as Tillich claims, then for the psalmist, in contrast to the apostle, who is patient, 'there is an anxious waiting'.[69]

'You have to imagine / a waiting that is not impatient / because it is timeless,' Thomas insists in one of the poems from *The Echoes Return Slow*. God's waiting is 'not impatient' (though it is not, implicitly, infinitely patient). The poem pictures the process of evolution – 'from *habilus* to *erectus* / from the gill to the lungs' – taking place in the blink of God's eye. This non-anthropomorphic eye closes on the dinosaurs and reopens on 'Greece, London'. In the near future, the poet implies, further cataclysmic shifts will take place. The 'nictitating membrane' – that is, the inner eyelid characteristic of birds and reptiles – 'will come down to lift / on a planet gone under / the ice or water.' For God, no doubt, none of these planetary changes are more meaningful than any other; and 'the stars are as dew / in its world, punctuating its unending story' (CLP 52). But for the poet it is impossible to repress the apocalyptic implications of this vision. If God is 'not impatient', to cite the significant double negative again, then the poet is, by the same token, 'not unanxious'. Even if one is a misanthrope, it is no simple matter to contemplate this kind of ecological destruction with the equanimity of an absent God.

In one of the final poems in this same volume, in which the poet watches as 'the moon comes to its fifteenth phase', Thomas evokes another eye that appears to have a nictitating membrane. This is 'the lidless / eye that beholds the beast / and the virgin', which Yeats discovers 'in his tower', according to the poem, as he is 'poring over the manuscript / of his people'. This image no doubt refers to 'the lidless eye that loves the sun' in Yeats's 'Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation' (1910), which betokens an aristocratic disposition, and which is generally taken to refer, concretely, either to the lidless eye of a classical statue or, more often, to that of an eagle (the following line, after all, evokes 'sweet laughing eagle thoughts').[70] Yeats's striking image itself, I think, alludes not to Keats's 'lidless-eyed train / Of planets', but to P.B.

Shelley's portrait of the sleepless protagonist of *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), who suffers a seemingly endless condition of enforced vigilance for which one of the Furies taunts him: 'Dost imagine / We will but laugh into thy lidless eyes?'[71] If Thomas's trope is thus traced back to its Romantic source in Shelley – whose spectre, Harold Bloom once claimed, 'hovers over Thomas's shoulder like an avenging dark angel'[72] – it reveals that the state of sleepless vigilance that in God is transcendentally calm is in humanity not only anxious but, at times, torturous.

The waiting Tillich has in mind in his sermon is dialectical in form: 'Waiting means *not* having and having at the same time.' It is thus 'a tremendous tension'.[73] This is the condition, embodied in the insomniac night, of the 'becoming self' whom Rowan Williams identifies as the principal subject of Thomas's poetry: 'the sense of a self poised in tension.'[74] For in a sleepless state – when, to echo Eliot's formulation once more, time stops and time never ends – the self subsists in a relationship to darkness, and to nothingness, that is almost physical in its intimacy. As his night-pieces make apparent, R.S. Thomas's poetry dramatises the tremendous tension that is characteristic of negative theology: it finds in sleeplessness a trope for the poet-priest's ironic, tragic relationship, both corporeal and spiritual, to a God that is at once absent and present. The poems themselves, embodying wide-open eyes that admit yet ward off the night, perform a vigil.

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[1] R.S. Thomas, 'Words and the Poet,' in *R.S. Thomas: Selected Prose*, ed. Sandra Anstey (Bridgend, 1983), p. 77.

[2] Chris Fitter, 'The Poetic Nocturne: From Ancient Motif to Renaissance Genre,' *Early Modern Literary Studies* 3: 2 (September, 1997), p. 1. On the sometimes subtle shifts in Thomas's evolution as a poet, and on his consistency, see Christopher Morgan, *R.S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, Deity* (Manchester, 2009), p. 186: 'He was a poet who worked his field, constantly working and reworking the new into the old, producing shades, echoes, reflections. It is important to view Thomas's work less in terms of linear stages of development and more in terms of deepening and often paradoxical complexity in which seemingly separate "categories" of poems enjoy ongoing reciprocities of definition and meaning.'

[3] T.S. Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages,' *Four Quartets*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London, 1969), p. 185.

[4] R.S. Thomas, *Collected Later Poems: 1988-2000* (Hexham, 2004), p. 246. Hereafter, this volume is abbreviated to CLP and cited in parenthesis.

[5] R.S. Thomas, 'The Other,' in *Collected Poems 1945-1990* (London, 1993), p. 45. Hereafter, this volume is abbreviated to CP and cited in parenthesis.

[6] Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, 1992 [1954]), p. 95.

[7] Michel Foucault, 'Standing Vigil for the Day to Come' (1963), trans. Elise Woodard and Robert Harvey, *Foucault Studies* 19 (2015), p. 219.

Michel Foucault, 'Standing Vigil for the Day to Come' (1963), trans. Elise Woodard and Robert Harvey, *Foucault Studies* 19 (2015), p. 219.

[9] Quoted in Graham Turner, 'A Poet Who Sang Creation,' *Daily Telegraph* (4 December 1999), Arts Section, p. 1.

[10] Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth, 1998), p. 69.

[11] Eliot, 'In Memoriam,' in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London, 1975), p. 245. Thomas testified that, as a child, Tennyson was his 'favourite poet' – see R.S. Thomas, 'No-One' (1985), in *Autobiographies*, trans. Jason Walford Davies (London, 1998), p. 32.

[12] Seamus Heaney, 'R.S. Thomas Memorial, delivered at Westminster Abbey, March 28th, 2001,' *Poetry Ireland Review* 69 (Summer, 2001), p. 11.

[13] Mark Jarman, 'Praying and Bird Watching: The Life of R.S. Thomas,' *The Hudson Review* 60: 1 (Spring, 2007), p. 173.

[14] D.Z. Phillips, *R.S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God* (Basingstoke, 1986), p. xv.

[15] Mark Jarman, 'Praying and Bird Watching: The Life of R.S. Thomas,' *The Hudson Review* 60: 1 (Spring, 2007), p. 173.

[16] D.Z. Phillips, *R.S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God* (Basingstoke, 1986), p. xv.

[17] John Barnie, 'Was R.S. Thomas an Atheist Manqué?' in *Echoes to the Amen: Essays after R.S. Thomas*, ed. Damian Walford Davies (Cardiff, 2003), p. 60.

[18] Quoted in William V. Davis, 'R.S. Thomas: Poet-Priest of the Apocalyptic Mode,' *South Central Review* 4: 4 (Winter, 1987), p. 92.

[19] R.S. Thomas, 'Introduction,' *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse* (Harmondsworth, 1961), pp. 9, 10.

[20] Quoted in Elaine Shepherd, *R.S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence: Images of God Explored* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 2.

[21] Rowan Williams, 'Adult Geometry: Dangerous Thoughts in R.S. Thomas,' in *The Page's Drift: R.S. Thomas at Eighty*, ed. M. Wynn Thomas (Bridgend, 1993), pp. 86-7.

[22] Williams, 'Adult Geometry,' p. 82.

[23] Quoted in Turner, 'A Poet Who Sang Creation,' p. 1.

[24] R.S. Thomas, 'Introduction,' *A Choice of George Herbert's Verse* (London, 1967), p. 16.

[25] S.J. Perry, *Chameleon Poet: R.S. Thomas and the Literary Tradition* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 152-3. See Morgan, *R.S. Thomas*, Chapter 7.

[26] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Digswell Place, 1953), pp. 261, 263.

[27] R.S. Thomas, 'R.S. Thomas at Seventy' (1983), quoted in Morgan, *R.S. Thomas*, p. 171.

[28] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, p. 72.

[29] Thomas, 'Introduction,' *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse* , p. 9.

[30] Turner, 'A Poet Who Sang Creation,' p. 1.

[31] Robinson Jeffers, 'Hooded Night,' in *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, p. 150.

[32] Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'From *In Memoriam*,' in *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, p. 144.

[33] Thomas, 'Introduction,' *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, p. 11.

[34] Thomas, 'Introduction,' *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, p. 9.

[35] Compare this statement from Thomas's 'Words and the Poet', in *R.S. Thomas: Selected Prose*, p. 70: 'It is always tempting to treat words rather like pebbles picked up on the beach; to turn them round, admiring their shape and texture, and to wonder how they came to be as they are.'

[36] Sigmund Freud, 'Two Encyclopaedia Articles,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. XVIII, trans. James Strachey (London, 2001), p. 242.

[37] Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the* Pensées *of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. Philip Thody (London, 2016 [1956]), p. 68.

[38] John Keats, *Endymion*, I, 598, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard (Harmondsworth, 1988), p. 87.

[39] Catherine Pickstock, 'The Univocalist Mode of Production,' in Creston Davis, John Milbank and Slavoj Zizek, eds, *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham, 2005), p. 300.

[40] R.S. Thomas, *Frequencies* (London, 1978), p. 33. This poem was not included in Thomas's *Collected Poems*.

[41] Quoted in Tom Conley, 'Living with Blaise,' in Mary Ann Caws, *Blaise Pascal: Miracles and Reason* (London, 2017), p. 14.

[42] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth, 1995), p. 127.

[43] Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, pp. 36, 37.

[44] Pascal, *Pensées*, pp. 122, 123.

[45] Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, pp. 37, 75.

[46] Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, p. 68.

[47] Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, trans. p. 55. See Tony Brown, *R.S. Thomas* (Cardiff, 2006), pp. 79-80.

[48] Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, p. 61. See Brown, *R.S. Thomas*, p. 95.

[49] T.S. Eliot, 'Introduction,' in *Pascal's Pensées*, trans. W.F. Trotter (London, 1931), pp. xv, xvi.

[50] Thomas, 'No-One,' in *Autobiographies*, p. 30.

[51] Eliot, 'Introduction,' in *Pascal's Pensées*, p. ix.

[52] Thomas, 'A Frame for Poetry,' in *Selected Prose*, p. 90.

[53] Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,' trans. Ken Frieden, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York, 1992), p. 91.

[54] Craig Koslofsky, *Evening's Empire: A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 47.

[55] Koslofsky, *Evening's Empire*, p. 49.

[56] Koslofsky, *Evening's Empire*, p. 59.

[57] Koslofsky, *Evening's Empire*, p. 72.

[58] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Night Passages: Philosophy, Literature, and Film* (New York, 2013 [2008]), p. 184.

[59] Koslofsky, *Evening's Empire*, p. 79. The quotation is from John's *Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

[60] George Herbert, 'Even-song,' in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C.A. Patrides (London, 1974), p. 204.

[61] Henry Vaughan, 'The Night,' in *The Metaphysical Poets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Harmondsworth, 1985), pp. 280-81.

[62] John Donne, 'A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day, being the shortest day,' in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A.J. Smith (Harmondsworth, 1986), pp. 72-3.

[63] John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London, 1990), p. 158.

[64] Thomas, 'No-One', in *Autobiographies*, p. ?.

[65] John Henry Newman, 'Sleep,' in *Lyra Apostolica* (Derby, 1837), p. 85.

[66] Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, *Two Poets of the Oxford Movement: John Keble and John Henry Newman* (London, 1996), p. 223.

[67] Eliot, 'Introduction,' in *Pascal's Pensées*, p. xix.

[68] Jacques Derrida, 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices,' trans, John P. Leavey Jr., in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p. 312.

[69] Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (Harmondsworth, 1962), pp. 151, 154, 151.

[70] W.B. Yeats, 'Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation,' in *Collected Poems* (London, 1990), p. 106.

[71] P.B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, I, 478-9, in *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford, 1971), p. 218.

[72] Quoted in Alistair Heys, *R.S. Thomas and Romanticism* (Dayton, Ohio, 2004), p. 207 Heys later refers – on p. 230 – to 'Thomas's identification with the figure of Prometheus'. Perry, for his part, in his helpful chapter on 'The Sublime, insists that 'the strength of Shelley's influence upon some of the passages in *The Echoes Return Slow* hints at the way in which Thomas integrated Shelley's "Promethean" spirit within his own Romantic self-image, this book being, among other things, an experiment in autobiography' – see *Chameleon Poet*, p. 222.

[73] Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, pp. 151, 153.

[74] 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, 2003), p. 216.