

Themes of Nature: Body, Spirit, Place

and a collection of poems

Finding The Room

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Declaration of Authorship

I ...William Searle..... (please insert name) hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

The thesis explores three themes, - *Body, Spirit, Place*, – that are fundamental to my own poetry collection, *Finding The Room*. Taken together, my poetry and the thesis form a comprehensive understanding of the human subject's relation to the natural world, and aim towards a redefinition of human subjectivity.

In chapter one, through a phenomenological inquiry into the poetry of Ted Hughes, the primordial unity between the body and the natural world is explored. Born out of the intercorporeal rapport between body and world is the Natural Self which perceives itself to be interwoven into its sensuous surroundings, sharing its flesh with the flesh of the world. Out of the primordial coherence between the human body and the body of the earth, occurs the genesis of sacredness, leading on to chapter two which explores the nature-mysticism of R.S. Thomas whose spirituality is presented as being enrooted in an incorporeal bond between body and world.

In chapter two it is argued that spirituality is grounded in the actuality of the intercorporeal fusion between body and world, and that the numinous reveals itself through the earth to those that, like R.S. Thomas, attune their senses to the sensuous world, and awaken their Hierophantic Self.

Chapter three explores the dynamic between *dwelling* and *things* in the context of Wordsworth's poem, 'Michael.' Using the philosophy of dwelling and things as propounded by Martin Heidegger, the chapter focuses upon place as the primary happening of the possibility to dwell peacefully and intimately alongside things.

All three chapters aim towards a redefinition of human subjectivity: a carnal being of the numinous, belonging to the earth, emplaced peacefully amidst things; a possibility that I explore throughout *Finding The Room*.

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Introduction

The three themes, - *Body, Spirit, Place*, - that I have chosen to focus upon in this thesis are three themes that are explored throughout my poetry collection, *Finding The Room*. I will discuss these themes as topics in their own right and also, show how these topics shed light upon my own poetry, and vice versa.

My approach to the three themes has been primarily philosophical, rather than literary. This choice of approach is due not only in my interest in promoting dialogues between philosophy and poetry, but also a philosophical approach took me into areas of thought that are not made explicit in the composition of poetry. Thinking philosophically seems to be at odds with thinking poetically, and I am interested in comparing philosophy with poetry in terms of how they both look at and study the world of sensuous, bodily experience. Bodily experience, attuning the human senses to the sensuous, provides the foundation for a concrete spirituality and the significance of place as the context of a rapport between sentience and spirituality.

My own poetry stems from an imaginative exploration of experience that is not divorced from reality but rather goes back toward reality. I am conscious, in my poetry, of not losing sight of the real that first of all inspires the poem. There is the type of imagination that indulges in ripping away the mind from direct experience, and this what I call the *abstract imagination*. There is also the type of imagination that turns the mind back towards the realities of direct, sensuous experience, re-aligning the mind with the more primordial adhesion between body and world, - and this is what I call *concrete imagination*. The poets that I chose to discuss in this thesis, - Ted Hughes, R.S. Thomas, William Wordsworth, - write poetry that is informed by the concrete imagination. Their work turns the mind back towards the real and the real, not the mind, is the unfathomable mystery, the touchstone of truth, the 'Central Enigma' that is title of one of my own poems. As I too write from the concrete imagination, then my own poetry is of the same tradition as the above named poets. My own poetry is *of* the world and returns to the world in ever deepening cycles of reciprocation. I am, therefore, interested in the ways in which this theme of returning to the natural world, the world of direct, sensuous, bodily experience, that is evident in my poetry is situated alongside philosophical traditions, and how these philosophical traditions can assist in developing and clarifying what is going on when

a poet writes a poem that refers back to the natural world, and how relations to the natural world can be ameliorated and deepened.

In addition to the relation between philosophy and poetry is a more fundamental theme that underlies not only the philosophy, but my poetry too, which is humanity's relation to the natural world. Poetry and philosophy converge at the root, which is the natural world. My poetry and my interest in philosophy are in service to the natural world that is the fount and bedrock not only of my own writing, but also of the understanding of my own humanity.

Chapter one explores a phenomenological approach to the natural world through the poetry of Ted Hughes. Phenomenology, - the direct study and description of sense-experience, - lends itself well to the study of Ted Hughes whose primary importance as a poet lies in the presentation of the fundamental and absolutely inextricable bond between the natural world and the human body. The human *is* the body, and the body is nature's creation, just as other bodies of other creatures are. In this way, the poetry of Ted Hughes is phenomenological in that he seems to want, at times, to achieve a description of an immediate experience of nature before discursive, conceptual thought invades upon the secretive dance between the body and the natural world. From this, I would also say that my own poetry is phenomenological in that I want to write about things directly experienced, seen, touched, etc. because, in direct sensuous experience, the possibility of a growing, conscious awareness of the mind's dependency on the body's participatory involvement with the natural world is forged.

As a consequence of repeatedly returning to the natural world, re-immersing the human body, and thus the mind, into the sensuous terrain from which it emerges, is also to discover, as a consequence, the sacredness of that interrelation. My own poetry explores this, as well as the body's engagement in the natural world, but also the numinous quality that surrounds and suffuses sensuous experience that is evident in my poems: 'Finding The Room,' and 'Keyhaven Marshes.'

Awareness of the presence of the divine arises out of wholly immersing oneself into the reality of the sensuous world. This realisation led me on to write Chapter two that focuses on R.S. Thomas's growing bond with the sacredness of the sea. This sacredness is revealed not by turning away from sense-experience, which is often promoted in the history of mysticism, but by turning towards it. The resurgence

of the natural world, the earth itself, as the primary context of human lives is not complete without the reawakening of the sense of the divine implicit in living things. For R.S. Thomas, it was the sea that communicated to him - once he had found within himself that sacred ear - the divinity of creation.

The final chapter, Chapter three, through a Heideggarian account of Wordsworth's 'Michael,' focuses upon the *whereness* of things and our relation to the *whereness* of things. The poem 'Michael,' serves as a contemporary reminder of the necessity of finding our place in the world, and how place, belonging and home have been ostracised by the modern, philosophical obsession - beginning with Descartes radical separation between mind and body - with space and time. Prior to space and time, Heidegger shows, is *place*, the happening of where our belonging lies, and where all things, inhuman and human nestle into one another and thrive.

My own response to 'Michael,' in my poetry is through the character 'Gwilym Jones,' who, as a shepherd in the modern day, finds himself simultaneously emplaced and displaced. Emplaced due to his bond with the natural world in his native land of Snowdonia, but displaced by the pull of the modern world of technology that threatens to alienate him from his native place. Gwilym Jones is somewhere between Michael and Luke. On one hand, he is a traditional shepherd, living for his flock and the mountains, knowing every blast of wind and the touch and shape of every rock. And on the other hand, like Luke, he is lured into the modern world of what Heidegger calls *techne*, the reduction of the world to resource, and the loss of his abiding place in the rising shadow of a fundamental homelessness that is definitive, Heidegger says, of modern man. Caught between two worlds, Gwilym Jones battles not only to retain his lasting knowledge of the land against the bewitching threat of modernisation, but also not failing to pass his place-knowledge onto his son, Emlyn Jones, who is already submerged in a world of *techne*. But Gwilym lacks the astuteness to retrieve his son from the homelessness of modernisation, and lives out his life, as a retired shepherd, wallowing in the nostalgia for an authentic home, and in anger and bitterness towards the modern world that he cannot, not matter how forcefully he may daydream of a homeland, fight off.

The three themes, - *Body, Spirit, Place*, - explored in this thesis are the three themes are my own writing is concerned with. Additionally, critical research into these three themes has led to a greater awareness of my responsibilities as a writer to

foster and encourage responses in the reader that asks of him or her to question whether or not these three themes are relevant to his or hers experience of the natural world.

Chapter One

A Phenomenological Inquiry into the poetry of Ted Hughes

For just as we forget the blinking of our eyes and the rhythm
of our hearts, so too do we lose sight of our perceptual life.¹

Lawrence Hass.

We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;
We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident
as the rock and ocean that we are made from.²

Robinson Jeffers 'Carmel Point, '

After Moonless Midnight

I waded, deepening, and the fish
listened for me. They watched my each move
through their magical skins. In the stillness
their eyes waited, furious with gold brightness,
their gills moved. And in their thick sides
the power waited. And in their torpedo
concentration, their mouth-aimed intent,
their savagery waited, and their explosion.
They waited for me. The whole river
listened to me, and, blind,
invisibly watched me. And held me deeper
with its blind, invisible hands.
'We've got him,' it whispered, 'We've got him.'³

'After Moonless Midnight' is from the 1983 collection, *River*, and it serves as a comprehensive entry into this phenomenological inquiry.

At the close of the above poem's depiction of an unnerving, holistic experience, 'We've got him, 'We've got him' is the river's quiet celebration at the successful capture of the human, alien invader, into the river's mysterious, watery world. Through the suspended action of the fish and the obedience of the human to their stalled exhilaration, the river is able to seize upon the human's exposed vulnerability to the magic of the moonless night. Both river and man are blind in the moonless night. The magical skins of the fish are a kind of eye, a lens through which they watch the human being. 'They watch my each move/through their magical skins.' Their whole, lithe bodies are alive with vision.

¹ Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, Indiana University Press, 2008. p. 70.

² Robinson Jeffers, *The Selected Poetry*, ed. Tim Hunt. Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 676.

³ Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan, Faber and Faber, 2003, pp. 659-660.

That is their mode of being. Their golden skins are the only light and the human being cannot help but be drawn towards that source of illumination. He requires the lanterns of the fish to light his way. Their eyes are his eyes. He is absolutely committed. Withdrawal is not an option because it is the absolute, noetic habit of the body to be committed to the solicitations of the natural world. He is dependent upon an otherness that exceeds his knowledge to find a way into the dark heart of the river. The fish, like underwater torches, light his way in the night of the river where he is to be held in a primordial, cohesive community of inter-sensorial being established by the co-operation between his body, the body of the fish and the body of water in which this interacting tribe of bodies are immersed.

To illustrate the poem's portrayal of an animate, sensate river, the Mattole Tribe of the Californian Indians also experienced rivers as alive and sensate beings.

The river watches you and has a definite attitude, favourable or otherwise, toward you. Do not speak just before a wave breaks. Do not speak to passing rough water in a stream. Do not look at water very long for any one time, unless you have been to this spot ten times or more. Then the water there is used to you and does not mind if you're looking at it. Older men can talk in the presence of the water because they have been around so long that the water knows them. Until the water at any point knows you, however, it becomes very rough if you talk in its presence or look at it too long.⁴

Such an experience of the river by both the poet and the Mattole Indian are not peculiar to this instant alone, but rather constitute, as I will argue, the very essence of sense-experience. Within sense-experience, concealed from conscious view, is a world that is animate and alive as one's own self. The American eco-phenomenologist, David Abram, says in his *The Spell of the Sensuous*:

Such a mode of experience, which seems so strange and confused to our civilized ways of thinking, becomes understandable as soon as we acknowledge, underneath our conventional assumptions, the reciprocal nature of direct perception- the fact that to touch is also to feel oneself being touched, that to see also to feel oneself seen.⁵

⁴ Quoted in "Reciprocity," by David Abram in *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Bruce V. Foltz and Robert Frodeman, Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 86.

⁵ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Vintage, 1996, p. 69.

Wordsworth, too, experienced nature as an animate presence when, as he described in *The Prelude*, he stole forth in a skiff from the shore and was forced into a hasty retreat by the huge cliff that ‘with voluntary power instinct/Upreared its head’ and ‘like a living thing’⁶ strode after him. Episodes such as this show that nature is inherently an animate, and an expressive being that speaks to those whose minds are primordially rooted in the sensuous world, and not to those minds that immobilize nature under the cold weights of conceptual abstraction.

A deepening awareness of the body’s bewildering intimacy with the natural world reveals both the inseparable entwinement of body and world, and also the natural world’s primacy as an agency laden with its own meaning independent of human subjectivity. Along these lines of inquiry, the deeper one goes into the wild, improvisatory character of our bodies and the larger body of nature, it becomes evident that nature gives meaning to man and that nature is the primordial, expressive power that speaks through man. As the poem demonstrates, in order to enter into a reciprocal relationship with nature, the hierarchies of the Cartesian heritage understanding of perception must be abandoned in favour of a common level of bodily exchange. At this common level the natural world is experienced as animate as one’s own self and fulfils, as David Abram puts it in *Becoming Animal*, ‘the lovelorn yearning of our body for the larger Body of the Earth, and of the earth for us.’⁷

I

Through a phenomenological inquiry into the poetry of Ted Hughes I hope to show that, at bottom, a human being’s relation with the natural world is reciprocally intercorporeal and unfailingly participatory which implies that nature, first of all, is animate, in order that the human body reciprocate with it. Phenomenology, the direct description of sense-experience, reveals, as does poetry, a primordial, mutual, carnal bond exchanged between man and nature. As a consequence of this discovery, to speak of man as an isolated being situated within his own exclusive consciousness is, in fact, a false conclusion and which only subverts to the worn-out legacy of the Cartesian tyranny.

Subjectivity, the projective birth of the self, comes into existence through a continual, bodily interaction with other beings, other creatures. Through the carnal

⁶ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, A Parallel Text*, ed. J.C. Maxwell, Penguin Classics, p. 56, lines 402-420.

⁷ David Abram, *Becoming Animal*, Pantheon, 2010, p.27.

networking of the body, the perceived world is opened out before us. Perception is dependent upon the proximal existence of other, multiple beings. In short, experience of the world is only possible due to the existence of other, heterogeneous beings. Man, then, is a composite being, not a sole isolated entity moving about in his own private world. Hardwired, by nature, for diverse sensuous interaction with other beings, the wind, trees, blood and ice, man cannot be anything but an improvisatory being, open and integral to the spontaneity of life. Poet and phenomenologist seek, through intense styles of interrogation of sense experience, to reveal the world in its unrepeatable, concrete origination, to let reality speak for itself in all its full blown multiplicity, unheeded by intellectual traditions that, to quote Wordsworth again, ‘murder to dissect.’

Coming back to the above poem, ‘After Moonless Midnight,’ poet, river and the fish form a kind of illicit triangle of relation. They are getting to know each other, exploring each other in a vital communication of shapely, bodily awareness, surrendering themselves to the porosity of each other’s being, giving shape to a community of dark, almost indescribable beings. Through the calculative scheming of the fish and the blind groping of the river, the poet is drawn into the dark water by his initial commitment to it, by letting ‘the soft animal of the body loves what it loves.’⁸

The human subject, first by its own decisive, intentional power and then by the fabulous encouragement of the shimmering fish, is escorted from a position of eccentricity, (an arrogant verticality strolling along the banks peering down in an attitude of aloofness,) into a position of centrality amidst the life of the river, humbled in an eerie baptism of immanence, into a depth within which narcissism is effaced. The reflection of one’s self occurs at the surface; in depth we cannot see ourselves. To deepen is go beyond oneself caught up within the transcendent rhythms of exteriority, ‘to fall in love outward.’⁹

In the momentum of integration into the river’s body, the human self is submerged and gripped into a network of otherness and indeterminateness. This experience of nature’s possessiveness as indicated at the end of the poem is, in fact, a phenomenological truth. Merleau-Ponty says that ‘the things have us, and that it is not we who have the things.’¹⁰ *A priori*, things awaken our senses and then we attend to them after this initial, secret relation, then this discreet conversation of bodily rapport is ramified *a posteriori*, in the

⁸ Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*, Beacon Press, 1992, p. 110.

⁹ Jeffers. *The Selected Poetry*. p. 200.

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Northwestern University Press, 1968. p. 194.

styles in which we consciously move through the world. The pattern of the ensuing, primal, deepening coherence between life-forms is mutually participated in the active life-forms themselves. Nothing is inert. Everything is enraptured by their own pulses and directions of consanguinity.

The role of the fish is to act as the river's watchful and fascinating accomplice in the profound crime of luring the human subject into a strange immanence - the 'I's' watery grave and the consequent dismantling of anthropocentricity. The 'I's' watery grave is the value of proprioceptive intercorporeality; the I is drowned alive by its own immersive activity and is reborn as a proliferation of multiplicity in which nature's own multiplicity is expressed.

The American poet, Charles Olson, in his essay *Proprioception*, speaks of 'washing the ego out in its own bath.' He also describes the type of consciousness that is allied with egotism as 'consciousness as ego and thus no flow.'¹¹ Consciousness allied with the ego blocks the flow between body and world, but consciousness allied with the body keeps the flow between body and world open. This damming up of the flow between body and world is an imposition by the ego, the self-conscious 'I', that functions by way of lifting itself out of the carnal love between body and world, extricating itself out of the participatory rapport, and then barricading itself off from the sensuous world in its own net of abstraction. Abstaining from interaction, it forgets, in what biologist E.O. Wilson calls 'amnesiac reverie,' the origin and root of its own realm - the body-world ground. Such is the source of alienation from the natural world, denying the natural world its own expressive power. Recovery of the way the body proprioceptively interacts with the natural world can re-vivify consciousness as essentially a carnal expression of our own body's interaction with the sensuous world. Through proprioception - the acute awareness of our body's movement in the world - consciousness becomes inextricably integral to sentience. Recuperation of our proprioceptive awareness breaks open the concrete slabs of abstraction that the discursive intellect paves over the primordial world of immediate sense-experience, thereby releasing the astonishing realisation that life is lived from within, not from without.

This links up nicely with 'After Moonless Midnight.' The darkness into which the poet merges into is symbolic of the processes of re-familiarising himself with the natural world, a strange and uncanny experience. He is going back through his own oblivion, his own amnesiac reverie through his own intellectual Lethe, towards the light of the fish, the

¹¹ Charles Olson, *Proprioception*, City Lights Books, 1965.

light of primordiality. And in this drama of intercorporeality and discrete reciprocity between beings, the eyes of the fish and the hands of the river work together synergistically to form an incomplete body of their own opened out towards the penetrative approach of the human body. Paradoxically, there is no moon, no steady, guiding illumination and yet there is so much knowing going on, so much discovery in the dark.

The human subject, in the moment he commits to wading into the river, triggers off a secretive dialectic of enticement between the river and the fish which culminates in the submersion of the purely human and in his eventual, repeatedly deepened, return into the 'life-world,' - a sustained return into *the things themselves* which possess their own inherent powers of expression. Fish, man and river become a heterogeneous community of interpenetrated beings held together in a weird coherence of unique perspectives. Why does the river want him? Because the river knows deeper than he does it is in the river that he wants to be, that his body gravitates toward. The river, by holding him in its depth, secures the human body's 'anchorage in the world.'¹² And because of this security, the intercorporeality, the *Ineinander* of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, the interlacement between human and animal life, is both ratified and enhanced.

Both river and fish fulfil the human desire 'to be woven into a fabric that pre-exists but also includes us.'¹³ And this pre-existing fabric of intercorporeality is never a static, finished form. It is continually being woven and re-woven by our bodies sensorial encounter with the world, at one moment the human body leading at another the world. The fabric of inter-sensorial being is an improvised field of perceptual exploration, adjusting to the textures, hues and shapes of other forms. It is open. This open field of intercorporeality is the 'life-world,' a matrix of bodily contact shifting beneath our conscious apprehension. The river and the fish represent, or more accurately, they *are* the 'life-world,' the *Lebenswelt*, which Edmund Husserl spoke of in his phenomenological investigations into intersubjectivity. David Abram, in his *Spell of the Sensuous*, defines the 'life-world' as:

The life-world is the world of our immediately lived experience *as* we live it, prior to all our thoughts about it. It is that which is present to us in our everyday tasks and enjoyment- reality as it engages us before being analyzed by our theories and our science...It is not a private, but a collective dimension- the common field our lives and the other

¹² Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, Routledge, 2008, p.79.

¹³ "An Inquiry into the Intercorporeal Relations Between Humans and the Earth," by Kenneth Liberman in *Dwelling on the Landscapes of Thought: Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Suzanne L. Cataldi and William S. Hamrick, State University of New York Press, 2002, p. 45.

lives with which ours are entwined- and yet it is a profoundly ambiguous and indeterminate, since our experience of this field is always relative to our situation within it. The life-world is thus the world as we organically experience it in its enigmatic multiplicity and open-endedness, prior, indeed to conceptualizing it in any complete fashion.¹⁴

The life-world, the prolific orchestrations of sense-encounters preformed by the body and world is, to use Deleuze and Guattari's terminology in *A Thousand Plateaus*, a rhizomatic assemblage. Deleuze and Guattari define the rhizome as:

altogether different, a map not a tracing. Make a map, not a tracing. The orchid does reproduce the tracing of the wasp; it forms a map with the wasp, in a rhizome. What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely orientated toward an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious. It fosters connections between fields, the removal of blockages on bodies without organs, the maximum opening of bodies without organs onto a plane of consistency. It is itself a part of the rhizome. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification...perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it has multiple entryways...¹⁵

The life-world, as a rhizomatic assemblage 'fosters connections,' it is open, connectable and susceptible. Deleuze goes on to say that:

a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*...the middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one way *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its bank and picks up speed in the middle.¹⁶

It is as though the above passage were written for the very poem itself! The rhizomatic characteristic of the life-world also extends to what Merleau-Ponty, in his later philosophy, names *Flesh*, the ubiquitous element of experience, and I will

¹⁴ *The Spell of the Sensuous*. p. 40.

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, Continuum, 2009, p. 13.

¹⁶ *A Thousand Plateaus*. p. 15

discuss this term towards the end of this chapter. But for now, it is evident from the poem that something is at work deeper than the poet's conscious self in bringing him into animate and intimate relation with an animate world. The fish and river vie for the body's attention that's caught up in the middle of the rhizomatic assemblage of this life-world of intersubjective momentum.

The river and the fish, as ambassadors of the life-world, win over the human by manifesting themselves as entities to be remembered and related to, and not to be overlooked, blindsided. In the poem, the human goes through a strange ordeal in order to remember and engage with that which lies at the roots of his self, which is his bodily engagement with the world. He engages with that which is passed over in conceptual oblivion in the objective operations devised by man to bend the world to his will. The poem describes the movement of the human subject's ontological re-inhabitation of the natural world achieved by the human subject surrendering himself to the very world that first of all permits him to make that movement of surrender. The natural world gives him the gift of his bodily-movement, what phenomenologists call 'intentionality', and he reciprocates this gift by going back toward the natural world in a pendulum swing of reciprocity. He returns to the origin of his own being that is irreducibly *other* than the being that he *thinks* he is. Born out of this return is what Merleau-Ponty calls 'the miracle of expression.'¹⁷ The miracle of expression being the fact that our own expressive being is given to us by a being that is alien and unfathomable - a gift from a stranger. And it is this dehiscence or resistance to be entirely *known* at the heart of expressive life that causes the natural world to be a source of wonder. Our own bodies are a miracle of expression. It is completely miraculous that the human body can perceive in the unique way that it does. It could have been otherwise in the course of evolution. Over time, the human body and nature have co-evolved and mutually grown into one another. What is miraculous, and this what I think Merleau-Ponty is getting at, is that perception is inherently miraculous because out of infinite possibility in the course of evolution there is no reason why we should exist at all.

¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, Routledge, 2006, pp. 101.

So, to return to the sensuous world, to look and listen harder and more attentively to the mystery of life that surrounds and gusts through is to be, in a manner of speaking, deeply thankful. And this essential humility is also expressed implicitly in the poem. To return to nature is to give oneself back to the original giver. In the poem, man is bent to the will of the world and because of this is forced to redefine himself as something which is wholly a part of the life that surrounds him and not something which, in steadfast arrogance, claims to be separate. The poem is a trajectory, a path, in unlearning the illusion objective knowledge and a relearning of the enigmatic and much deeper world that human subjectivity depends upon to create the kingdom of objectivity. The poem describes the work that goes into creating the foundations of our own being.

Continuing with these investigations in the poem, if we follow in our mind's eye the human as he steps off the bank and into the dark water we can follow him in the process of becoming intimately interrelated with the world and gripped by the world, learning to let the body see in the dark and let itself be navigated through the world by beings other than its own.

The poem charts the movement of the human's intercorporeal engagement with the world and the birth of new type of subjectivity aligned with the body's orientations toward things in which the life-world is not overlooked but incorporated into the human's perceptual field. A new type of subjectivity hinged around the body is not a subjectivity associated with an isolated 'I' but rather a subjectivity that ripens through enraptured engagement with other life forms embedded within the sensuous world.

Intercorporeality, the human's bodily engagement with the world, is the process by which human subjectivity is redefined to its original state of primal contact with things. This primal contact lies below conscious awareness. Below conscious awareness, within the deeper layers of the body's ontological continuity with the world, "nature penetrates to the centre of my life and is interwoven in it."¹⁸ Nature and body are inextricably interwoven in the centre of one's being, so much so that one cannot say that one exists apart from things, even in the withdrawn tactics of conceptual reflection. As nature and body are interwoven to such an extent like the double helix DNA through the centre of one's being, it is an impossible claim to say

¹⁸ Quoted in Ted Toadvine, *Singing the World in a New Key: Merleau-Ponty and the Ontology of Sense*, Trivium Publications, 2004, p. 280.

that self and world are distinct. The very centre of one's being is in fact nature's own particular expression of itself. 'After Moonless Midnight' charts the human's journey into the dark centre of his own being which turns out not to be his but rather nature's own immense, unknowable arena of itself. Nature takes back what belongs to it, and this is in fact where man belongs: in the possession of nature.

II

A phenomenological discussion of 'After Moonless Midnight' has put the course of this chapter on the right track. In this chapter I am going to investigate phenomenologically into different episodes or stages of intercorporeality that occur throughout a number of Ted Hughes's poems. And then I am going to show how these different but continuous stages of intercorporeality aim toward a thorough redefinition of human subjectivity. I chose phenomenology as the tool of inquiry because it shares a common aim with the poems of Ted Hughes that is to 'concentrate all its efforts upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world.'¹⁹ Phenomenology, whose chief exponent is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, grew out of a resistance against the Cartesian model of the universe, whose mechanics are based upon a strict bifurcation between subjective knowledge and objective fact, the separation of consciousness from matter, the former regarded as derivative of the latter and thereby, less true. Objective, determinate facts are thereby conceived of as the touchstones of truth by which all other ways of knowing are measured and found wanting. Reality, then, can only be accessed by the disinterested observer because the disinterested observer is the one who is committed to purging material of subjective, raw, actually lived experience. An inert, acutely observable world trumps the detrimental, secondary pulse of subjectivity. Life, immediately lived in its ambivalent rawness, is overlooked, forgotten, thwarted, and only comes to serve the utilitarian eye. Is relegated to a resource to fuel, what Merleau-Ponty called, the 'prejudice of objectivity.'

Taylor Carman, in his critical analysis of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, states that 'thought and insight do not come first, but follow as effects or

¹⁹ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. p. 8.

achievements from prior, unreflective perceptual groping and exploration.²⁰ The purpose of phenomenology and, to some extent, the poems of Ted Hughes, is to locate and describe this unreflective life of bodily groping and exploration of sensation. And, it is within this pre-reflective life that the map of perceptual life is drawn. The subjective-objective split, argue phenomenologists, is artificial and does not accord with our actual experience of the world. Phenomenologists seek to re-instate life as it is actually lived in the discourse of our daily, technically adumbrated lives. Phenomenologists seek, through descriptive inquiry, to discover the moment of our lives prior to the subjective-objective split, indeed, to discover the perceived world at its birth and our own carnal genesis arising from the Earth's Body. Merleau-Ponty, in the preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception*, writes:

The real has to be described, not constructed or formed. Which means that I cannot put perception into the same category as the syntheses represented by judgements, acts or predictions. My field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noised and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world, yet which nevertheless is immediately emplaced within the world, without ever confusing them in my daydreams. Equally constantly I weave dreams round things. I imagine people and things whose presence is compatible with the context, yet who are not in fact involved in it: they are ahead of reality, in the realm of the imaginary. If the reality of my perception were based solely on the intrinsic 'coherence' of 'representations,' it ought to be forever hesitant and being wrapped up in my conjectures and possibilities. I ought to be ceaselessly taking apart misleading syntheses, and reinstating in reality stray phenomena which I had excluded in the first place. But this does not happen. The real is a closely woven fabric. It does not await our judgment before incorporating the most surprising phenomena, or before rejecting the most plausible figments of our imagination.

Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not 'inhabit' only 'the inner man,' or more accurately, there is

²⁰ Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, Routledge, 2008, p. 69.

no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.²¹

‘After Moonless Midnight’ demonstrates the movement of a man knowing himself through the world, an opening up of himself towards a wider horizon of beings, breaking through the myopic vision of an exclusive self into the more diverse rhythms of the pre-reflective, bodily life. This commitment is, as Kenneth Liberman puts it, ‘a recovery of intercorporeality.’ As a consequence of this recovery, there is a revelation of a ‘brute unity through which the universe ‘holds’ and of which the unity of human understanding is the expression rather than the internal condition.’²² The river and fish and man become that ‘brute unity’ which holds itself together through the adhesive powers of their bodies drawn to each other through their particular routes of intentionality. Re-instatement of the body’s pre-reflective mobility in our intellectual comprehension of the world requires, first off all, an unwavering faith in the truthful evidence of sense-experience as it is presented to us, and to recognise and affirm where and at what point in our perceptual history earth and body overlap, intertwine, and animate each other in a charged reciprocity. What will become explicit in our investigative dialogue between phenomenology and the poems of Ted Hughes is that perception is participatory and bodily as opposed to isolated and purely cognitive. Corporeality is the essential door through which human consciousness gains access and understanding of its place in the world.

Coming back to ‘After Moonless Night,’ there is in the poem a sort of *conversation* that is being enacted between the human subject, the river and the fish. The dialogue is spoken in the physical language of the engaging bodies, ‘in a language older than words.’²³ At first, one can imagine the human subject strolling along the bank, enamoured in its own altitudinous cogitation, and eavesdropping upon the river’s conversations and, fascinated, cannot resist interrupting, to break the flow, and pick up the conversation where it left off. The scripts and carnal liquidity of the river folds around his limbs, whisper past his ears that are too slow to catch the transient, elusive gossip. Fish, beneath the surface, are enraptured in their own

²¹ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. p. 11.

²² Liberman p. 40.

²³ *Becoming Animal*. p. 90.

dialogues of silence, commenting upon his awkward, ungainly entrance into their territory, listening intently to the silent words of his body.

Rather than mere fantastical anthropomorphisms, the corporeal dialogue that swirls back and forth between the dark beings in the poems lies at the heart, Merleau-Ponty argues, of our improvised interactivities with the perceived world. ‘We’ve got him,’ ‘We’ve got him’ is spoken in the universal language of the body-world rapport that sounds beneath the dull, deaf and dumb quest of egocentric transcendence. The fishes’ quiet exclamation of consanguinity is the pronouncement of a human being’s return into the life-world - that ambiguous system of experience stirring beneath the shallow levels of our self-consciousness. It could even be said that sense-experience and the definition of the world occurs without such an experience being known. Not only is there an unconscious of the mind, there is also the unconscious of the body repressed by the mind. The body, I believe, dreams, desires and remembers what it is like to be touched by the earth. The body is the royal road, the *Via Regina*, to the fullest understanding of our ourselves. Perception happens unconsciously and involuntary, like breathing or the beating of the heart. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

The fact is that if we want to describe it, we must say that my experience breaks forth into things and transcends itself in them, because it always comes into being within the framework of a certain setting in relation to the world which is the definition of my body...The thing is big if my gaze cannot fully take it in, small if it does so easily, and intermediate sizes are distinguishable according as, when placed at equal distance from me, they cause a smaller or greater dilation of the eye...It is therefore quite true that any perception of a thing...refers back to the positing of the world and of a system of experience in which my body is inescapably involved.²⁴

The body, then, is what first of all, through an inescapable dialogue with the world, makes that world a possibility of experience. But this body, as I shall discuss later, is hardly at my egocentric disposal but rather a rhythmic expression of the natural world which in turn, exceeds, in its inexhaustible immanence the ‘I’s’ stunted grasp. Caught up in a carnal dialogue with nature, Merleau-Ponty writes: ‘the relations between things or aspects of things having always our body as their vehicle, the whole of nature is the setting of our own life, or our interlocutor in a sort of

²⁴ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. pp. 303-304.

dialogue.²⁵ Nature is the transcendent theatre within which the drama of the body's vital communion with the world, with things and sensations, is played out in endless, spontaneous improvisation.

Merleau-Ponty also says that 'it can literally be said that our senses question things and that things reply to them.'²⁶ The fundamental conversation between our body and the world constitutes our experience of a certain sensuous terrain. Out of this conversation is born the perceptual field into which one's whole being is inserted. The ontological inquiry by the body toward the world occurs beneath our conscious apprehension of the perceived. David Abram calls the body's conversation with things an 'improvised duet,' a dance of creativity between perceiver and perceived.

III

Ted Hughes's poem 'Wodwo' is taken from his 1967 collection of the same name. It is the personified activity of the corporeal spirit of inquiry that seeks to attain a grip upon the world. In this poem, Wodwo is the demonstration of Merleau-Ponty's statement that there 'is no inner man,' that the discovery of oneself is located within the *projective* movements of the body, as opposed to the *introjective* gaze of the mind into oneself which is, I believe, an insular dead-end. The outward world of which one is a part is where the manifestation of oneself as a carnal being occurs. Yes, the body is *attuned* to the world but, as phenomenology describes, the real crux of our bond with the earth is in the re-immersing of oneself into the *attuning*, partaking within the sensorial present of the body attuning to the world as it happens in the depths of the present moment.

Through the open-ended exploration of the exterior horizons that rhythmically close and open up before him, Wodwo is led deeper into a mystery made up of both himself and the world:

What am I? Nosing here, turning leaves over
Following a faint stain on the air to the river's edge
I enter water. Who am I to split
The glassy grain of water looking upward I see the bed

²⁵ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. pp. 370-373.

²⁶ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. pp. 369-372.

Of the river above me upside down very clear
 What am I doing here in mid-air? Why do I find
 this frog so interesting as I inspect its most secret
 interior and make it my own? Do these weeds
 know me and name me to each other have they
 seen me before do I fit in their world? I seem
 separate from the ground and not rooted but dropped
 out of nothing casually I've no threads
 fastening me to anything I can go anywhere
 I seem to have been given the freedom
 of this place what am I then? And picking
 bits of bark off this rotten stump gives me
 no pleasure and it's no use so why do I do it
 me and doing that have coincided very queerly
 But what shall I be called am I the first
 have I an owner what shape am I what
 shape am I am I huge if I go
 to the end on this way past these trees and past these trees
 till I get tired that's touching one wall of me
 for the moment if I sit still how everything
 stops to watch me I suppose I am the exact centre
 but there's all this what is it roots roots roots roots
 and here's the water again very queer but I'll go on looking²⁷

Discovering what he/she is wholly depends upon the extent to which, in Ted Toadvine's phrase, 'the inexhaustible perceptual plenitude'²⁸ is explored. By the end of the poem, the extent to *what* he is is equally inexhaustible as the sensuous terrain itself. In its ongoing, intimate quest with the persistent queerness of the perceptual field, it becomes evident that the question of an interior man is made obsolete in its probing of what Merleau-Ponty called the unfathomable 'enigma of the brute world.'²⁹ It is through the world that a sense of what Wodwo is, as a wave of rhythm, is made manifest. Wodwo feels himself come into being out of the very world he throws himself toward. He undergoes the experience of being born out of that which he experiences as though the sensuous world were already pregnant with him. His presence makes the outward latency of himself become manifest.

The poem also describes the fluid dynamic of perception that is characterised by a continual, open indeterminacy in dialogue with the indeterminate, sensorial landscape. Merleau-Ponty's examples of the dynamic of perception shed light upon

²⁷ Hughes, *Collected Poems*. p. 183.

²⁸ Toadvine. p. 55.

²⁹ *The Visible and the Invisible*. p. 156.

the poem. Here, we can imagine that the philosopher is Wodwo who goes on looking because he *can*, because he is summoned by the queerness of the world:

If I walk along a shore towards a ship that has run aground, and the funnel or masts merge into the forest bordering on the sand dunes, there will be a moment when these details suddenly become part of the ship, and indissolubly fused with it. As I approached...I... felt that the look of the object was on the point of altering, that something was imminent in this tension, as a storm is imminent in storm clouds. Suddenly the sight before me was cast in a manner satisfying to my vague expectation.³⁰

Lawrence Hass, in his discussion of Merleau-Ponty, says of perception that:

What we have, then, as part of our secret life with things is a movement from indeterminacy to configuration and back again. This dynamic is a sort of pulse that beats as we move through and engage things in the world. It is why we experience living perception as an ongoing, meaningful flow rather than static snapshots or discrete objects. And it is rather natural outgrowth of our living body's insertion in a world of natural and cultural things that go beyond it every-which-way.³¹

From the above quotations Wodwo the character can be regarded as a figure of our own living perception. Caught up within the sensational enjambment of Wodwo's being-in-the-world is the process of bodily perception whereby Wodwo's fascinated exploration of the organic world is made possible. The possibility of Wodwo's access to things wholly depends upon the body's immediate willingness to comply with the summoning of each thing and of each sensation. Wodwo is drawn onward through the organic sensorium by the magnetized charge of natural phenomena which is first of all, prior to the conceptualization of what he is, empowered by the body's interrelation with things. The body is summoned forth by things because things themselves are active agents of carnal expression. In the event of perception, Merleau-Ponty says that:

³⁰ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. p. 17.

³¹ Hass. *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*. p 67.

My gaze pairs off with colour, and my hand with hardness and softness, and in this transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers significance on the other. Apart from the probing of my hand, and before my body synchronizes with it, the sensible is nothing but a vague beckoning.³²

Wodwo obeys the vague and yet certain beckoning of the sensible because his body affirms the response. Wodwo's repeated questions are spoken by the voice of the body in reply to the polyphonic voice of the sensible. The conversation reels in a dynamic interplay between body and world thwarting any closure of the perceptual event that could stifle the freedom of the bodily pose. The thorough engagement with things enacted by Wodwo confirms the phenomenological vision of an implicit reciprocation between body and world in the event of perception. Just as the poet is sucked into the dynamism of things and beings in 'After Moonless Midnight,' Wodwo finds this endless sucking-in a source of fascination. Wodwo is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, caught up in a 'momentum which carries us beyond subjectivity because round about the perceived body a vortex forms, towards which my world is drawn and, so to speak, sucked in.'³³ Wodwo's movement through the world is only possible by the fact that he/she is a body possessed by the world which, at no point, can be exorcised or extracted.

Wodwo can be regarded as the energised impulse of the body's ceaseless attunement to the summoning of things: the secret interrogator that sits at the heart of our perceptual participation with the world. Merleau-Ponty reiterates the actuality of the body's unremitting questions by adding:

a sensible quality, like the colour blue, which is on the point of being felt set a kind of muddle problem for my body to solve. I must find the attitude which will provide it with the means of becoming determinate, showing up as blue; I must find the reply to a question which is obscurely expressed. And yet I do so only when I am invited by it; my attitude is never sufficient to make me really see blue or really touch a hard surface. The sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place. As I

³² *The Phenomenology of Perception*. p. 214.

³³ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. p. 412.

contemplate the blue of the sky...I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, 'it thinks itself within me,' I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue...³⁴

The attitude adopted by this 'I' so that it can enter into the mystery of the sky is not the domineering, oppositional attitude adopted by egocentricity. The 'I' in this passage as well as the 'I' in Wodwo is the expression of a deeper self whose attitude towards things is identical to the ontological attitude of the body. This 'I' is the 'Natural Self,' which is characterised by its abandonment to the solicitations of sensuous phenomena. It synchronises itself with a certain thing or aspect of things in order to bring about a perceptual encounter. This Natural Self is that which perceives what David Abram terms the 'more-than-human-world' as animate and magnetic.

The Natural Self is nature's own gift, or what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'primal gift,'³⁵ entrusted to us but which we immediately give back in a ceaseless, carnal reciprocity. The Natural Self is our way *into* the world and is *of* the world. It gives us access to a democratic totality that exists beyond our intellectual comprehension. Wodwo, as the Natural Self, is primordially enamored with a world that is to be explored, described, participated in, but which in every look or touch is indefinable but somehow, clearly *there*. Merleau-Ponty writes of 'the prepossession of a totality which is there before one knows how and why, whose realizations are never what we would have imagined them to be, and which nonetheless fulfills a secret expectation within us, since we believe in it tirelessly.'³⁶ Wodwo, (as the natural self,) demonstrates the secretive commitment to a world that is unknowable but which paradoxically ensures his enrootedness in that world. Wodwo's unhesitant attitude in knowing himself through the world is characteristic of the Natural Self's faith in the reliable correspondence of phenomena; an obscure knowledge defined by clear mysteries.

Wodwo's interrogation of sense-experience is not performed by an ego but by the Natural Self, which has already and wholeheartedly abandoned itself to the world, to water, roots, and trees. Wodwo *is* the Natural Self whose life is co-natural with 'the

³⁴ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. p. 260.

³⁵ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. p. 251.

³⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 42.

ongoing emergence of the real'³⁷ and whose status is in the world 'as the heart is in the organism,'³⁸ forming an open system of reciprocity between perceiver and perceived. The Natural Self maintains what Merleau Ponty calls the 'natural attitude' which endlessly thwarts closure of any perceptual encounter; the 'visible spectacle is kept constant alive' by the Natural Self's attitude towards the world, endlessly on the look out for further migrations into the open, sensuous field. In another passage which sheds light on the Natural Self's intimate attitude towards the world, Merleau Ponty writes:

The relations between sentient to sensible are comparable with those of the sleep to his slumber: sleep suddenly comes when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from outside the confirmation for which it was waiting. I am breathing deeply in order to summon sleep, and suddenly it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside of myself which alternately calls forth and is forced back by breath. A certain rhythm of respiration, which a moment ago I voluntarily maintained, now becomes my very being, and sleep, until now aimed at..., suddenly becomes my situation. In the same way I give ear, or look in the expectation of a sensation, and suddenly the sensible takes possession of my ear or my gaze, and I surrender a part of my body, even my whole, to this particular manner of vibrating and filling space known as blue or red...³⁹

The sensible takes possession of the body because of the Natural Self's openness toward the possessive kinship of nature. The Natural Self is not personal in this sense of an 'I' that's related to a particular person or situation or which pilots the ship of one's self. The Natural Self, much more complex than this, is our general mode of access onto the perceptual plenitude and which first all takes the plunge. Taylor Carmon elucidates the Natural Self by saying:

Underlying that (more or less) transparent personal subject is a more primitive, one might say translucent layer of bodily experience that has a more impersonal character better captured by the French pronoun on ("one" or "we"), as one in one blink every few seconds, or we breathe through our noses.

³⁷ *Becoming Animal*. p. 180.

³⁸ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. pp. 200.

³⁹ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. pp. 211-212.

The pre-personal bodily subject of perception is thus not my conscious, reflective self, but simply “the one”.⁴⁰

Discovery of the “one” is a consequence of the affirmation of the Natural Self. Merleau-Ponty says of this “one,” that:

All perception takes place in an atmosphere of generality and is given to us as anonymous. I cannot say I see the blue of the sky in the sense in which I say I understand a book, or again in which I say I decide to devote my life to mathematics... if I wanted to render precisely that perceptual experience, I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, not that *I* perceive.⁴¹

The Natural Self is an anonymity that I cannot call my own and while I must admit that the existence of the Natural Self is what first of all renders perceptual experience possible. This anonymity, ‘the one,’ which I will from here designate as the Natural Self, continually re-vamps itself through contact with other bodily beings, with other concretions of ‘the one.’ The Natural Self maintains what Toadvine calls an ‘originary faith’ in the world, and ‘the originary faith in the world is the fundamental ‘yes’’, that underlies all aspirations of the ‘I.’⁴² Merleau-Ponty says the Natural Self ‘runs through me, yet does independently of me,’ and ‘each time I experience a sensation, I feel that it concerns not my own being, the one for which I am responsible and for which I make decisions, but another self which has already sided with the world.’⁴³

How, then, does one gain greater access to this Natural Self whose ‘thoughts’ are the ‘thoughts’ of the earth, a self which has already sided with the world before personal thought about the world has commenced? Through an attentive abandonment of the conscious self in a rapturous fascination with things and sensations the Natural Self that has already sided with the world is befriended and affirmed. The Natural Self that was latent within conscious experience of a thing or sensation becomes manifest, and the ‘precognitive grip on the environment,’⁴⁴ what Merleau-Ponty terms the ‘*meilleu prise*,’ (optimal grip), is revitalized, given over to itself.

⁴⁰ Taylor Carman. *Merleau-Ponty*. Routledge, 2008, p. 94.

⁴¹ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. pp. 249-250.

⁴² Toadvine. p. 67.

⁴³ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. pp. 250

⁴⁴ Carman. p. 90.

Wodwo's inability to step back from the world, to define and objectify it, is an expression of the unknowability of one's self as the subject of sensation. The ongoing enigma of both himself and the world is an endless cause of fascination rather than analysis and dissection. Because he doesn't know who is and only knows *that* he is because of the active world engaging him, he cannot, at any point, form any kind of calcified judgement about the world or himself. The conviviality of the world around and within him thwarts the desire to intellectualise. He is turned inside out. He receives the notion that he is living because the world itself is living. The world's pulse is his own and yet irreducibly *other*.

It is as though the questions posed by Wodwo were posed by the natural world itself. Wodwo's mode of self-inquiry, as in the *Natural Self* expounded by Merleau-Ponty, is in the form of questions which do not separate Wodwo from the natural surroundings; the questions' unanswerability inspire Wodwo to enfold himself back into the surroundings, rather the questions posed by Wodwo do not require straight answers because they seem to arise out the intercorporeal process itself. They lie beyond discursive dispute. Wodwo's eventful movements are the silent answers. And the questions seem as part of the surroundings just as much as the trees, roots and waters. As Merleau-Ponty indicated, such questions 'are a way of taking bearings upon the world.' And what is true for Wodwo is also true of ourselves: 'If we are ourselves in questions in the very unfolding of our life...it is because we ourselves are one continued question, a perpetual enterprise of taking our bearings on the constellations of the world.'⁴⁵ In the poem, the question-marks dissolve away because Wodwo becomes a continued question, a spirit of open inquiry. Wodwo moves within a world that exists beyond conclusion, brimming with a perpetual excess and abundance of being. Wodwo, even though he exists as a perpetual question, *knows* because he exists as a body *knowing*, which occurs in the form of 'I can.' Wodwo is testimony to the phenomenological truth which that 'the deepest sort of knowing is summoned by this anonymity, which subsists not as knowledge but as events.'⁴⁶ *I think therefore I am* becomes *I can therefore I am*. Wodwo demonstrates a deep faith in an indefinable world; it is almost religious.

⁴⁵ *The Visible and the Invisible* p. 103.

⁴⁶ Liberman. p. 40.

Wodwo experiences himself as a sentient being. The gift of nature is Wodwo's sentience. At the same time, sensation means the revelation of anonymity, the rebirth of the nameless, Natural Self. Indeed, in a long and definitive passage in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty says:

Every sensation carries within it the germ of a dream or depersonalization such as we experience in that quasi-stupor to which we are reduced when we really try to live at the level of sensation. It is this knowledge that teaches me that sensation would not occur unless my body were in some way adapted to it, for example, that there would be no specific contact unless I moved my hand. But this activity takes place on the periphery of my being. I am no more aware of being the true subject of sensation than of my birth or my death. Neither my birth nor my death can appear to me as experiences of my own, since, I thought them thus, I should be assuming myself to be pre-existent to, or outliving, myself, in order to be able to experience them, and I should not therefore be genuinely thinking of my birth or my death. I can, then, apprehend myself only as 'already born' and 'still alive'- I can apprehend my birth and death only as pre-personal horizons: I know that people are born and die, but I cannot know my own birth and death. Each sensation, being strictly speaking, the first, and last and only one of its kind, is a birth and death.⁴⁷

Just as in 'After Moonless Midnight,' the true subject of sensation does not turn out to be an exclusively human property. Merleau-Ponty says that the world of sense-perception 'ceaselessly assails and beleaguers subjectivity as waves wash round a wreck on the shore.'⁴⁸ In sense-perception, a new sense of self is discovered which, unlike the ship of anthropocentric subjectivity tearing through the world, is rather more in tune with the world, guided by the world.

There seems to be no fixed, stable centre of clear, categorical knowability. Wodwo, through his ontological interrogations of the natural world, experiences each sensation as though for the first time. This improvised pattern of originality is woven through a cooperative relation between the Natural self and the natural world. Wodwo is born again anew with each pulse of sensation, and as such, he lives the dream of depersonalisation. The dream of depersonalisation becomes the real situation. Both

⁴⁷ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. pp. 250.

⁴⁸ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. pp. 320.

Wodwo and the world are equally, and mutually, inexhaustible. At the same time, out there, he discovers himself, literally, as ‘no one.’ It is as though, the water, the roots, ‘the concrete physiognomy’ of things were itself the exterior dream of an inner depersonalisation. It is as though the world were turned inside out. Each sensation is the birth of Natural Self, as though the world itself were already pregnant with the possibility of depersonalisation. Merleau Ponty says that ‘the subject of sensation is neither a thinker who takes note of quality, nor an inert setting which is affected by it, it is a power which is born into, and simultaneously with, a certain existential environment, or is synchronized with it.’⁴⁹

So far then, it is clear that through an enhanced awareness of inter-sensorial relation, subjectivity is redefined as something which is essentially indefinable, anonymous and unfathomable and whose life is connatural with the world. To reiterate this, Merleau Ponty says that:

The I, really, is nobody, is the anonymous; it must be so, prior to all objectification, denomination, in order to be the Operator, or the one to whom all this occurs. The named I, the I names, is an object. The primary I, of which this one is the objectification, is the unknown to whom all is given to see or to think, to whom everything appeals, before...there is something.⁵⁰

The Operator, not the ego (*that* has been vanquished), but the Natural Self, the anonymity within and without, is born into the world and finds itself in the midst of things, surrounded by living, breathing subjects and not dead, inert matter.

IV

The birth of the Natural Self into the world is also explored in Ted Hughes’ poem ‘Go Fishing’ which is from his 1983 collection, *River*. As in ‘Wodwo,’ the birth and continual rebirth of the Natural Self corresponds to a sheer awakening of the concrete, unfathomable mystery of the upsurge of the natural world. A true, single subject of sensation is dismantled, and the essential anonymity at the heart of sense-

⁴⁹ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. pp. 260.

⁵⁰ *The Visible and the Invisible*. p. 200.

experience is born and becomes part of the world. Both world and self are equally subjects, co-existing in a communal rapport, unheeded by the scalpel of the ego. Here, the sense of the world at its birth is discovered:

Join water, wade in underbeing
 Let brain mist in moist earth
 Ghost loosen away downstream
 Gulp river and gravity

Lose words
 Cease
 Be assumed into glistenings of lymph
 As if creation were a wound
 As if this flow were all plasm healing

Be supplanted by mud and leaves and pebbles
 By sudden rainbow monster-structures
 That materialize in suspension gulping
 And dematerialize under pressure of the eye

Be cleft by the sliding prow
 Displaced by the hull of light and shadow

Dissolved in earth-wave, the soft sun-shock,
 Dismembered in sun-melt

Become translucent- one untangling drift
 Of water-mesh, and a weight of earth-taste light
 Mangled by wing-shadows
 Everything circling and flowing and hover-still

Crawl out over roots, new and nameless
 Search for face, harden into limbs

Let the world come back like a white hospital
 Busy with urgency words

Try to speak and nearly succeed
 Heal into time and other people⁵¹

Through the methodical techniques of immanence the poem becomes an appeal to the reader, the reader being that product of culture who has forgotten his or her primal bond with nature, to immerse his or her self in ‘underbeing’ which I take to be what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘that primordial being which is not yet subject-being and not yet

⁵¹ Hughes. p. 652.

object and which in every respect baffles reflection.’⁵² It is the deep place of potential forms: life in its embryonic vivacity. Also, ‘underbeing’ is the home of the Natural Self that is denied full exploration of this home by the restrictive claims of the ego, or what Merleau-Ponty calls the ‘personal self.’ It is hidden within the world we think about but whose full expression is stunted by the personal self’s inability of relinquishing itself into a wider, deeper, ordination of being.

Within ‘underbeing’ is also the enactment of the body’s capacity to metamorphosise, to become other than itself. The river draws the body through levels or stages of perception that deepen beyond the conscious self. The world of water and light present to the body intersecting levels of corporeal engagement the body undergoes, transforming itself through each level. Through these levels of metamorphosis, each level progressively takes the body beyond its ordinary capacities of empathic perspective. Each movement through a sensuous level corresponds to a dynamic shift in perspectival attitude. Alphonso Lingis states that ‘The world is not a framework, an order, or an arrangement...The levels are not dimensions we can survey from above; we find them not by toward them *but by moving with them.*’⁵³ By moving in tandem with the waves of the world, the body’s capacity to transform into that which it moves with becomes the situation. Becoming implies alliance between beings.

To ‘Go Fishing’ is a method of casting oneself out into the intelligence of the sensuous world, of being gripped by the world and of ‘unbinding the human arrangement of one’s senses,’⁵⁴ and letting oneself be re-arranged by the more-than-human-world. Within the processes and transformations of being re-arranged, one experiences oneself as that which performs the re-arranging. In this case, one is the water, light, shadow and the mud. One’s self becomes that which is done to oneself. The metamorphic propensity of the body is realized when one surrenders oneself to the abducting vision of the world. The world of water, shadows and light are artists painting oneself into existence. One’s self becomes the substance of their individually collated expressions. In this sense does oneself become the true subject of perception: the Natural Self.

⁵² *The Phenomenology of Perception*. p. 80.

⁵³ Alphonso Lingis, *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility*, Atlantic Highlands, N.J, Humanities Press, 1996, p. 33.

⁵⁴ *Becoming Animal*. p. 210.

The body drifts away from itself and merges into the mesh of water, shadow and light. The world of water and light that was merely surveyed now becomes the body's actual life. Things happen to the body rather than the body happening to the things. Even water, seemingly just a mass of liquid, is the very condition through which the body experiences itself as water. The water, light, the taste of the earth, then, are active agencies capable of cradling the body's concrete dreams of metamorphosis. The body's insertion into the water and light completes an open circuit of carnal empathy. And out of this empathic circuit of intercorporeality, a new sense of self, the Natural Self, comes to birth, perceiving itself as a shifting part of the shifting surroundings until it emerges out of the watery womb of the river and crawls out over the roots, healing into time, born anew and yet imprisoned into the 'white hospital,' of a culture that has clinically cut itself off from the brute enigma of the natural world.

As in 'After Moonless Midnight,' the action of wading is the slow plunge of the personal self into the waters of the life-world in which the Natural Self emerges as a shape of awareness immersed in the life-world. The notion of plunging, in this case the slow pace of this plunge becomes wading, is not only incidental to these poems but rather is a required necessity of the personal self if ties with nature are going to be enhanced. Henri Bergson says, 'instead of trying to rise above our perception of things we plunge into it for the purpose of deepening and widening it.'⁵⁵ The personal self must sacrifice its narrow fear of organic immersion in order to gain access into 'underbeing,' and allow the Natural Self to bloom. Merleau-Ponty elaborates the notion of plunging in to let the body think itself through the world and the world think itself through the body:

We are catching sight of the necessity of another operation besides conversion to reflection, more fundamental than it, of a sort of *ur-reflection* that would not lose sight of the brute thing and brute perception and would not finally efface them, would not cut the organic bonds...of our mute contact with the world when they are not yet things said...it must plunge into the world instead of surveying it.⁵⁶

Once within the river of 'underbeing' the sense of a definite self becomes obscure and the sense of a self whose movements become dictated by the river become

⁵⁵ Quoted in Ted Toadvine, *Nature and Negation, Chiasmi 2, 2000, 107-117.*

⁵⁶ *The Visible and the Invisible.* pp. 38-39.

prominent. The self, then, that is gripped within ‘underbeing’ is the malleable self that has ‘already sided with the world,’ whose expressive movements are the expressive movements of the world itself. Nature is our life and our life is nature’s, this ‘our’ being the ‘one.’ Indeed, Lawrence Hass in his discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, says that:

there is no way to understand this fluid, sense-laden experience by analytical dissection, no way to explore or objectify ‘the secret life of things’ without tearing apart the tissue or freezing the flow. Instead, we must open our eyes and ears and hands to this carnal world.⁵⁷

Merleau-Ponty, elaborating on the Natural Self, says in his final, unfinished work, *The Visible And The Invisible*:

The perceiving subject, as a tacit, silent Being-at, which returns from the thing itself blindly identified, which is only a separation (*ecart*) with respect to it - the self of perception as “nobody,” in the sense of Ulysses, as the anonymous one buried in the world, and that has not yet traced its path. Perception as imperception, evident in non-possession: it is precisely because one knows too well what one is dealing with that one has no need to posit it as an ob-ject. Anonymity and generality. That means: not a *nichtiges Nichts*, but a ‘lake of non-being,’ a certain nothingness sunken into a local and temporal openness...⁵⁸

The ‘lake of non-being,’ the Natural Self whose fitting appellation is Ulysses, brims and overflows in the ‘local and temporal openness’ of the river. A lake in a river. Merleau-Ponty elsewhere terms this ‘lake of non-being,’ as a ‘decompression in Being.’ This ‘lake of non-being,’ or decompression in Being, is the Natural Self’s point of emigration, its target into which it plunges, and through which the intertwining between human and earth is most fully inter-developed.

V

Ted Hughes’s poem ‘Salmon Eggs’ from the same collection, also presents the Natural Self’s return to the world. It also incorporates within itself Merleau Ponty’s

⁵⁷ Hass. p. 80.

⁵⁸ *The Visible and the Invisible*. p. 215.

ultimate term *Flesh* which I mentioned earlier on, and which he invented in his later philosophy to designate the fundamental intertwining or *chiasm* between the natural, anonymous self and the world. The Natural Self becomes, in his later philosophy, an active segment of the general Flesh of the world of which body and world are an expression of.

The salmon eggs were just down there -
Shivering together, touching at each other,
Shedding themselves for each other -

Now beneath flood-murmur
They peel away deathwards.

January haze,
with a veined yolk of sun. In bone-damp cold
I lean and watch the water, listening to water
Till my eyes forget me.

And the piled flow supplants me, the mud-blooms

All this ponderous light of everlasting
Collapsing away under its own weight

Mastodon ephemera

Mud-curdling, bull-doing, hem-twinkling
Caesarean of Heaven and Earth, unfelt

With exhumations and delirious advents-

Catkins
Wriggle at their mother's abundance. The spider clings to his craft.

Something else is going on in the river

More vital than death - death here means superficiality
Of small scaly limbs, parasitical. More grave than life
Whose reflex jaws and famished crystals
Seem incidental
To this telling - these tidings of plasm -
The melt of mouthing silence, the charge of light
Dumb with immensity.

The river goes on
Sliding through its place, undergoing itself
In its wheel.

I make out the sunk foundations

Of dislocated crypts, a bedrock
 Time-hewn, time-riven altar. And this is the liturgy
 of Earth's advent- harrowing, crowned - a travail
 Of raptures and rendings. Perpetual mass
 Of the waters
 Wells from the cleft.

This is the swollen vent
 Of the nameless
 Teeming inside atoms - and inside the haze
 And inside the sun and inside the earth.

It is the font brimming with touch and whisper,
 swaddling the egg.

Only birth matters
 Say the river's whorls.

And the river
 Silences everything in a leaf-mouldering hush
 Where sun rolls bare, and earth rolls,

and mind condenses on old haws.⁵⁹

In 'Salmon eggs,' through the poet's rapt attention to the salmon and river, he forgets that part of himself which forgets his intercorporeal bond with the earth. Silent, rapt attention seems to let reality enrich itself and through this rapt attention he becomes a part of the gazed-at-world not as a human being as such but as a body of reality's own self-enrichment. As a consequence of this temporal, positive amnesia, he becomes the Natural Self which has already sided with the world and which takes part in the river's 'piled flow,' and even in the life of the salmon eggs themselves. I have attempted to portray the activating power of bodily attention in my own poem, 'The Ewe and The Olive Tree.' By wholly giving myself into the power of attention, reality seems to ripen and intensify on its own accord. Despite the fact that the ewe in my poem is dead, - a kind of symbol of reality seen through alienated eyes - in rapt attention, reality is revived.

The Ewe and The Olive Tree

Our sandals flicked dust
 into her maroon eyes.

⁵⁹ Hughes. p. 680.

Hornets bobbed above her
spilt fluid and placenta,

baked hard into a black
and red crust in the oven
of the olive tree's shade.
Plump veins lined her

stomach distended with
the size of an unborn lamb.
Her wool was shivering
alive with flies and fear.

The branches were shook
by a crow ruffling-up
for a meal. He wasn't scared
away by the gun-shots

of our claps. Crisp leaflets,
crumpled in the sun's fists,
showered down upon her
in delicate, whispering rasps.

Copper bells rattled around
the Naxos mountains:
a herd of echoes lost from
the shepherd of their sounds.

Rocks shone lime-white
in the heat, the light hurt.
No wind. Cypressess caught
fire with stillness, and blazed.

Her breathing was beating
as slow as a heart in a
sleeping body, and her heart
was weaker than her breathing.

She closed her eyes, and died
with the weight of our dust and
the little leaves upon them.
Two skulls and a farrago of bones

Returning to 'Salmon Eggs,' indeed, what has the poet discovered in his attentive exploration of the sensuous world? The co-arising birth of his Natural Self, and the incipient birth of the salmon, occurs because of his deeper realization of a 'namelessness teeming inside atoms,' in the sun and the earth, an even greater birth

that is occurring deep within the world like the slow onset of an earthquake of trans-corporeal feeling. The tempered revelation of this namelessness appears because he sees and feels with his Natural Self. The uncovering of his Natural Self leads to uncovering of an essential namelessness common to all things. This teeming namelessness is the founding condition of emerging existence. It is the primary possibility of birth. Things have it as their explosive epicenters. This primordial namelessness teeming like a life-force within the haze, sun and earth is, I believe, what Merleau-Ponty termed as Flesh or *Wild Being* - the primordial originator perception.

It is tempting to regard the essential namelessness of Flesh as a spiritual, incorporeal energy which manifests itself through the vectors of natural phenomena, even through one's own body. But the truth is, I profess, that this namelessness, in keeping with the phenomenological tradition, is a sheer physicality actively expressing itself through natural phenomena. It is the physical world's archetype embedded within that world. This palpitating namelessness is a fecund anonymity running through all things, and all things are caught up in its running. This namelessness is 'more vital than death,' 'more grave than life,' it is the original founder of life and death. Deeper and more vital than life and death, its expanse of profusion is manifested through particular instances of experience. Sense-experience of things and sensation are intimations of this intimate immensity called Flesh. It is the original condition for the event of birth, the inexhaustible fund of physicality from which life receives its visceral expression. This fecund anonymity is not, as it were, a mystical numinous force of divine influence, it is bound by earth-relations and exists with them, but it is mysterious. It is what Merleau Ponty called 'the enigma of the brute world.' And the poet's engagement with his Natural Self leads to the realization of this grand and tiny enigma.

But what, then, *is* Flesh, this enigma pulsating in the heart of things, an invisible body and infinite as the universe itself, an immense intimacy? The consanguinity between the Natural Self and the earth is only possible due to the pivotal role of Flesh. David Abram states that:

The flesh is the mysterious tissue of matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and perceived as interdependent

aspects of its own spontaneous activity. It is the reciprocal presence of the sentient in the sensible and of the sensible in the sentient.⁶⁰

As a reciprocal presence it secretly umpires and engages the reciprocal animation between perceiver and perceived and gives to them their peculiar intensities. The *chiasm* or intertwining between perceiver and perceived is only possible due to this Flesh, this fecund anonymity which the poets apprehends as ‘the font brimming with touch and whisper, swaddling the egg.’ Merleau-Ponty, in his *The Visible and the Invisible*, states that once the Natural Self is released into the grip of world:

Since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision. And thus for the same reason, the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by things, my activity is equally my passivity - which is the second and more profound sense of the narcissism: not to see in the outside, as the others see it, the contour of a body one inhabits, but especially to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen. It is the Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called Flesh, and one knows there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it. The Flesh is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of being which would add up or continue on one another to form beings. Nor is the visible (the things as well as my own body) some ‘psychic’ material that would be - God knows how - brought into being by the things factually existing and acting on my factual body. In general, it is not a fact or a sum of facts “material” “spiritual.” Nor is it a representation for a mind: a mind could not be captured by its own representations; it would rebel against this insertion into the visible which is essential to the seer. The Flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it we should need the old term “element,” in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The Flesh is in this sense an ‘element’ of Being.⁶¹

Flesh, then, is an element among the elements. The teeming namelessness is situated along with the fire of the sun, the bone-damp cold of the air, the light infused water of the river and the mud-curdling earth. The poet discovers this ‘fifth element’ as a

⁶⁰ *The Spell of the Sensuous*. p. 66.

⁶¹ *The Visible and the Invisible*. p. 139.

‘swollen vent,’ what Merleau Ponty calls ‘the central cavity,’⁶² through which a world among worlds is born. By a powerful forgetting of his personal self, his Natural Self follows the clues of nature, listening, watching, which take him to the central cavity, the oracle of physical matter, the womb of all things. It is as though the world of sensation, the light, the river, all of it presents itself as map that he must closely read through the committed ‘yes’ of his Natural self, which will guide to the co-ordinates of the ‘swollen vent,’ the Flesh of the world.

The Flesh, as described in the above quote, is a general, ubiquitous anonymity and the poet’s realisation of the general anonymity which speaks, to quote Abram again, ‘in a language older than words,’ enplaces and envelops him within a community of anonymity and of birth. The Flesh is described as ‘swaddling’ the eggs. It does not constrict and constraint but rather enhances the development of the eggs, simultaneously protecting them and releasing them. The Flesh swaddling the egg is a ‘miraculous influence.’⁶³ The birth of the salmon will constitute an individual moment in the general event of the world that is born anew through each moment by the presence of Flesh. The poet discovers life in its unadulterated originality.

Also, the awareness of a general Flesh of the world, a reciprocal presence from which we emerge and to which we return in every perceptual encounter, re-validates the world itself as something animate, alive and not mere dead, objective matter. The world becomes alive as one’s own self is alive. This is evident from ‘After Moonless Midnight,’ where the fish watch his every move and the river blindly gropes him. The Flesh animates both perceiver and perceived into a reciprocal relation. Flesh is akin to Coleridge’s description of the workings of the Imagination which acts a fulcrum, or intermediate faculty between agents of activity and passivity. Coleridge says:

Let us consider what we do when we leap. We first resist the gravitating power by an act purely voluntary, and then by another act, voluntary in part, we yield to it in order to light on the spot, which we had previously proposed to ourselves. Now let a man watch his mind while he is composing; or, to take a still more common case, while he is trying to recollect a name;

⁶²*The Visible and the Invisible*. p. 212.

⁶³ ‘Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,’ by Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode, Library of America. 1997. p.444.

and he will find the process completely analogous. Most of my readers will have observed a small water-insect on the surface of rivulets, which throws a cinque-spotted shadow fringed with prismatic colours on the sunny bottom of a brook; and will have noticed, how the little animal wins its way up against the stream, by alternating pulses of active and passive motion, now resisting the current, and now yielding to it on order to gather strength and momentary fulcrum of further propulsion.⁶⁴

To be both active and passive in perception is be like the water insect moving itself by co-operation between the drag and push of two alternating forces which unite within an intermediate and surrounding faculty termed Flesh.

Coming back to 'Salmon Eggs,' the Flesh is an active anonymity which is the condition from the contractive and expressive movements of birth to occur. Carol Bigwood states that the pregnancy of Flesh 'is the power to break forth.'⁶⁵ But the mind itself, in the poem, shrivels back from this power of breaking forth and 'condenses on old haws.' It loses sight of the interconnectedness of all things and retreats into the narrow sphere of itself, staring out, to quote Blake, through the narrow chinks of its cavern. Like a broken record unable to break out of its stagnant rut, the mind withdraws from the Natural Self's enjoined circulation amongst thriving life and, as a consequence, the direct apprehension of a fecund namelessness is obscured and distanced. The failure of the mind to forget itself, and emigrate into the world of Flesh and commit itself to the intercorporeality of the body-world relation seems to be, according to the tone of the poem, as natural a movement as the river of light itself. The 'mind condenses on old haws.' It solidifies back into the opaque border of itself located at the fringe of things, blind once again to the flourishing interdependence between the flesh of the body and flesh of the world.

In the poem, bodily immanence implies cognitive impermanence. The movement of the mind is represented as one of retreat from the sensuous world whereas the body represents movements of unwavering obedience and advancement into the sensuous world. If only, then, mind could be re-conceived as bodily, the

⁶⁴ *The Romantic Imagination: A Selection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Spencer Hill. Macmillan, 1977, p. 33.

⁶⁵ 'Logos of Our Eco in the Feminine: An Approach Through Heidegger, Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty,' by Carol Bigwood in *Dwelling on the Landscapes of Thought: Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Suzanne L. Cataldi and William S. Hamrick. State University of New York Press, 2002, p. 101.

body-thinking perhaps, would the sensuous world enfold us back into it its carnal ambivalence? Mind, as described in both ‘Go Fishing’ and ‘Salmon Eggs,’ is the culprit of alienation from the natural world. Sustained recognition of our flesh as partaking in the flesh of world can disarm the mind, and lead us beyond anthropocentrism and into the rhythmic life of the body. To think is to think as a body.

VI

Poetic imagination and phenomenological interrogation rebel against a mind condensing on old haws, and seek to re-integrate Mind back into the carnal world. What is required is a new sense of Mind as proposed by David Abram in *Becoming Animal*, as he sits above a high valley in the North American Mountain range of the Sierra Nevada:

Mind, here in this high valley suspended beneath the blue, seems a vast thing, open and at ease. The thoughts that soar into view, the sedimented knowings, the bright blossomings of sensations are all held, here, within an encompassing equilibrium, permeated by a silence that swells and breathes with cycles of light.⁶⁶

Such a paradigmatic shift in the understanding of our mind is possible once we recognise the primacy of our bodily life as a creation of the immeasurable Flesh of the world and that ‘sentience was never our private possession: we live immersed in intelligence, enveloped and informed by a creativity we cannot fathom.’⁶⁷ Flesh, not matter or substance, but a general thing is the active agent behind and secretly within all body-world interaction. Merleau-Ponty, in one of his cryptic working notes, also says that the ‘Flesh as the Mother’⁶⁸ from which the carnal world is born.

The American poet Mary Oliver’s experience of salmon coincides with Ted Hughes as in the experience a sense of birth is gained. The body is born from the Flesh-as-Mother which impregnates itself which was what Merleau Ponty meant when he said that, ‘Here is the common tissue of which we are made. The Wild Being. And the perception of this perception...is the inventory of this originating

⁶⁶ *Becoming Animal*. p. 113.

⁶⁷ *Becoming Animal*. Pantheon. p. 90

⁶⁸ *The Visible and the Invisible*. p. 249.

departure.’⁶⁹ Wild Being, or Flesh, engaging itself, invents the fold of the human body, and other bodies. Thinking of Flesh as Wild Being is perhaps, even though Merleau-Ponty doesn’t expand upon this new term, is probably a more fitting description of what I am trying to get at here. The problem with the term Flesh is that, not only evoking a sense a stasis, it conjures up the idea of flesh and blood and doesn’t take into account other types of flesh, the translucent flesh of the wind, the cold flesh of ice, for example. One could say that Flesh is less poetic than Wild Being. Also, Wild Being is much more in keeping with the sense that perception arises out a primordial, swirling, texture that is self-willing, wild. And Being, by being Wild, is rescued from stagnation and calcification. Being itself has been defined as ‘the Presence that makes things appear,’⁷⁰ the original surging-forth, *phusis*, of things that make themselves manifest. Along these lines, Wild Being would add to the sense that the principle activity of Being is self-willingness. Things will themselves into existence beyond our control. The common tissue of which we are made, not only human beings, but other beings, creatures, rocks, leaves, stars and sky, surge-forth on their own accord. In essence, things are Wild, and that is their Being.

The poet here, as with the poet in ‘Salmon Eggs’ takes part into intercorporeal, reciprocal exchange of bodies, a process whose limits are governed by the gift of the flesh.

Stroke by
stroke my
body remembers that life and cries for
the lost parts of itself -

fins, gills
opening like flowers into
the flesh - my legs
want to lock and become
one muscle, I swear I know
just what the blue-gray scales
shingling
the rest of me would
feel like!
paradise! Sprawled
in that motherlap,
in that dreamhouse

⁶⁹ A working note from *The Visible and the Invisible*. p. 203.

⁷⁰ Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis, An Essay On The History Of The Idea Of Nature*, trans. Michael Chase, Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 323.

of salt and exercise,
 what a spillage
 of nostalgia pleads
 from the very bones! how
 they long to give up the long trek
 inland, the brittle
 beauty of understanding,
 and dive,
 and simply
 become again a flaming body
 of blind feeling
 sleeking along
 in the luminous roughage of the sea's body,
 vanished
 like victory inside that
 insucking genesis, that
 roaring flamboyance, that
 perfect
 beginning and
 conclusion of our own.⁷¹

Flesh, *La Chair*, is the elemental mother of perception. Perception arises out of a relation between the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world. The flesh of the body and the flesh of the world are divergent strands, tissues, reaching out from the more basic Flesh that situates itself between the relation. Flesh impregnates itself and gives birth to the distinct attachment of body and world. It could even be said that Flesh is trans-relational, trans-elemental, immanent to the relation between body and world and yet remaining distinct from it, transcendent. Flesh, as Merleau Ponty describes, it as at once both immanent and transcendent, transcendent not in the metaphysical sense of the term, but rather in that it situates itself beyond the reach of the body within the world and yet, in the reaching of the body toward the world, perception is born. Our sense of the world arises out of that which exists beyond our grasp. Flesh, through its own self-involvement, inspires the intertwining between body and world, body and thing.

As another example to re-iterate what is meant by the way Flesh functions is from Emmanuel Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, who says that 'every relation or possession is situated within the nonpossessable which envelops or contains without

⁷¹ Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*, Beacon Press, 1992, p. 172.

being able to be contained or enveloped. We shall call it elemental.’⁷² It is also in this sense that the philosopher John Sallis defines the elemental- earth, water, fire and air - as manifestly ‘encompassing.’⁷³ The Flesh, like the swaddle around the salmon egg, encompasses life but what is singular about Flesh is that it also envelops and entwines relations into each other. It is simultaneously encompassing *and* integral to the relation between sentient and sensible. It is not even a thing as such but is like an invisible ocean encompassing and integral to the earth of which bodily beings are like waves, emerging, rising, and falling - an invisible element situated in the heart of the visible from which the ability to perceive arises. It is Flesh, coming at us from the outward world, which opens our senses back out into the world. Flesh engineers and empowers this cycle of exteriority, each turn of the carnal wheel an irrepeatable origin of Being, flinging forth the hands of our eyes.

Flesh, then, is an invisible element giving birth to our bodily beings, endowing them with the doors of the senses. Merleau-Ponty writes that the very ability to perceive at all arises from a central, trans-anonymity which is Flesh: ‘The visible about me seems to rest in itself. It as though our vision were formed at the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as that between the sea and the strand.’⁷⁴ This immense intimacy is the Flesh, from which our perceptual life emerges. Perhaps even more intimate than the earth itself, it is the element to which we most closely linked even while we cannot say what it really is. Flesh could be said to be the poet’s element. This is why, as both Merleau-Ponty and Ted Hughes discovered, it is nameless but fully *there*. And, mysteriously, it is because of this invisible element that we are fully integral to the life of other beings which perpetuates the intensity of presence.

Flesh is exactly this intertwinement of the body and world like the DNA helix, but which, not possessed by this relation, also propagates their multiple expressions of divergent perceptual angles or fields. Flesh guarantees multiplicity. It is the foundational reservoir of heterogeneity; in that sense it is ‘an ultimate notion.’

⁷² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay On Exteriority*, tran. Alphonso Lingis. Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 142.

⁷³ ‘The Elemental Earth,’ by John Sallis in *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Bruce V. Foltz and Robert Frodeman, Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 136.

⁷⁴ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. pp. 260.

Flesh, then should be thought of in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's account of a multiplicity:

A multiplicity is defined not by its elements, nor by a centre of unification or comprehension. It is defined by the number of dimensions it has... Since its variations and dimensions are immanent to it, it amounts to the same thing to say that each multiplicity is already composed of heterogeneous terms in symbiosis, and that a multiplicity is continually transforming itself into a string of other multiplicities, according to its threshold and doors.⁷⁵

From the Deleuzian descriptions of a multiplicity, it is evident that Flesh engaging, reacting with itself unleashes through itself other strands of flesh, other bodies and shapes of awareness, creating the body-relation which is an assemblage, and 'an assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections.'⁷⁶

The 'namelessness teeming inside atoms' is Flesh, and from this is born the ongoing emergence of the body-world helix and its continual, encircling interlacement, or 'chiasm' - the figure X. The poet's discovery of the flesh of the world can only lead him to realize that he is inexhaustibly *of* the world and that to be a body, simply to breathe, is to receive breath from a larger lung that is situated in the Body of Earth constituted of Flesh. To hear, touch, see and smell, even to think and reflect is to receive these from the flesh of the world and to partake in a 'common animate element,' which, even, though it is a commonality, gives to each being or things its own particular way of showing itself. Flesh, or Wild Being, is the steady, common mystery of individuality. It is what causes bodies to share a world, to encroach upon one another but still retain their own particular shapes and styles of awareness.

The phenomenologist David Abram underwent an identical experience in his encounter with spawning salmon off the North West coast of Alaska. In this incident he discovers, as does the poet in 'Salmon Eggs,' a common, animate element from which both he and the salmon emerge and engage each other in a sensorial

⁷⁵ *A Thousand Plateaus*. p. 15.

⁷⁶ *A Thousand Plateaus*. p. 21.

reciprocity - a small cycle of ceaseless give and take which partakes in the larger cycles of the earth, a circulation of carnal being animated by the Flesh of the world. He is led to believe that 'this circulation, this *systole* and *diastole*, is one of the signs that the earth is alive - this rhythmic pulse...'⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty, too, through his investigations into the Flesh of the world concluded that 'there really is expiration, inspiration in Being, respiration in Being.'⁷⁸ Within each sense-experience, body and world mutually animate each other through a reciprocal breathing, breathing life into each other within the encompassing of the Flesh, or Body of the Earth. Salmon, man and river bring each other to life in the simple act of sense-perception because they are primordially bound to one another by the Flesh of the world. Our existence as relational and sensible beings is due to an element which is precisely unknowable and this beneficent predicament, is, I believe, a permanent cause of astonishment and wonder. In the poet's bodily encounter with the world, he discovers through an inspired attentiveness to natural phenomena, the Natural Self which has already sided with the world and, if he sticks with that, the commonality of an element and the rhizomatic Flesh of the world is discovered.

VII

Both the poems of Ted Hughes and phenomenology show that 'the re-vindication of the natural world in its ontological primacy'⁷⁹ is not only possible but is an actual fact at work right before our very senses. Merleau-Ponty says:

When I find again the actual world as it is, under my hands, under my eyes, up against my body, I find much more than an object: [I find] a Being of which my vision is a part, a visibility older than my operations or my acts.⁸⁰

Both phenomenology and the poems of Ted Hughes force us to recognize the ongoing reciprocity between body and earth, and that our life is wholly dependent

⁷⁷ 'Reciprocity,' by David Abram in *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Edited by Bruce V. Foltz and Robert Frodeman. Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 85.

⁷⁸ Quoted in 'Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth,' by David Abram. *Environmental Ethics*, Volume 10, 1988, pp. 101-120.

⁷⁹ Toadvine. p. 40.

⁸⁰ *The Visible and the Invisible*. p. 200.

upon the earth of which we are a part. This ancestral affinity, or as Ted Hughes puts, ‘ancient thirst,’⁸¹ can be fulfilled only if we look again and learn again of the-bodies-that-we-are insertion into the world. Through this, natural objects which previously we might have ignored and merely given a quick glance, begin to command our attention, then we attend back not by dissecting it or analyzing but just by watching, listening, allowing the natural object to become a subject under the sway of its own active agency. Through an awakening of our immediate sensory life, the natural world is experienced as it really is - a commanding presence of active bodies resistant to our need to reduce things to utility and resource. Our lives in turn are enlivened and enriched:

We can sense the world around us only because we are entirely a part of this world, because- by virtue of our own carnal density and dynamism- we are wholly embedded in the depths of the earthly sensuous. We can feel the tangible textures, sounds, and shapes of the biosphere because we are tangible, resonant, audible shapes in our own right. We are born of these very waters, this very air, this loamy soil, this sunlight. Nourished and sustained by the substance of the breathing earth, we are flesh of its flesh. We are neither pure spirits nor pure minds, but are sensitive and sentient bodies able to be seen, heard, tasted, and touched by the beings around us.⁸²

In this perceptual interplay and in our quietly attentive interrogations of sense-experience of the more-than-human-world, as Ted Hughes and the discoveries made by phenomenology indicate, it is revealed to us who we really are - sensate bodies of co-operative relation, humility and awe.

I have attempted to show through this phenomenological inquiry into the poems of Ted Hughes that by an ontological re-inhabitation of the natural world and a permanent recognition of its unending multiplicity that exceeds and attracts the bodies that we are, is a process, a ‘gift earned by exercise,’⁸³ actually advancing outward into the profound depths of exteriority, reawakening the natural self that brings one’s whole being in tune with the Flesh of the world. Through an enhanced awareness of the sensuous world, the fundamental non-distinction between ourselves and the natural can be realized, so much so that with each passing sensation we

⁸¹ Hughes. p. 677.

⁸² *Becoming Animal*. Pantheon. p. 7.

⁸³ Hass. p. 70.

undergo an alteration within ourselves and, as Ted Hughes, and the inquiries made by phenomenology have indicated, we are born *into* the earth and experience the earth because our own flesh is an event of the Flesh of the world:

The visible can thus fill me and occupy me because I who see it do not see it from the depths of nothingness, but from the midst of itself; I the seer am also the visible. What makes the weight, the thickness, the flesh of each colour, of each sound, of each tactile texture, of the present, and of the world is the fact that he who grasps them feels himself emerge from them by a sort of coiling up or redoubling, fundamentally homogenous with them; he feels that he is the sensible itself coming to itself...⁸⁴

Both the poet's and the phenomenologist's radical search for direct contact with the world leads to the discovery of the human's and the world's inexhaustible absorption into each other and also leads to a communion between the visions of poetry and those of philosophy. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty says that 'Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being.'⁸⁵ And, I would add, poet and philosopher share an even deeper commonality: it is the Earth that is the prime bearer of truth, and it is back toward the Earth that the truth refers. The truth that both artist and philosopher carefully bring into being is a precious gift *of* the Earth.

⁸⁴ *The Visible and the Invisible*. p. 210.

⁸⁵ *The Phenomenology of Perception*. pp. 23.

Chapter Two

R.S. Thomas: Hierophant of The Sea

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless and gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.

I am awakened, I am born again at the voice of this my Sister, sent to me from the depths of the divine fecundity.⁸⁶

Thomas Merton, *'When The Trees Say Nothing.'*

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said,
"Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it."⁸⁷

Book of Genesis (28:10-19)

To be a mystic is simply to participate here and now in that real and eternal life; in the fullest, deepest sense which is possible to man. It is to share, as a free and conscious agent - not a servant, but a son - in the joyous travail of the Universe: its mighty onward sweep through pain and glory towards its home in God.⁸⁸

Evelyn Underhill, *'Mysticism.'*

Through a phenomenological evaluation of the poetry of Ted Hughes, the process of intercorporeality and the uncovering of an individual's essential rapport with the natural world was discovered. The poems of Ted Hughes portrayed a human being immersing himself into his intercorporeal relations with the earth, which lead to the

⁸⁶ Thomas Merton, *When The Trees Say Nothing*, ed. Kathleen Deignan, Sorin Books, 2008, p. 179.

⁸⁷ *Book of Genesis, The Bible*, Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 33.

⁸⁸ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism, A Study In The Nature And Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, Methuen, 1949, p. 447.

discovery of the Natural Self perceiving itself to be entirely a part of the natural world, feeling itself emerge from that which it perceives.

In this chapter, through a discussion of the nature-mysticism of R. S. Thomas, I am going to look at the process of the re-sacralisation of the natural world and the subsequent discovery of the Hierophantic Self⁸⁹ which perceives the natural world as a numinous creation of which the Self is a shining, integral part.

What links both chapters together is the idea of the human subject becoming integral to the natural world in an intercorporeal way, and then, in this chapter, in an incorporeal way. In other words, this chapter will explore spirituality grounded in actuality. An authentic, spiritual relationship to the natural world needs to be primordially rooted in the sensuous milieu through the concrete, foundational work of the body, otherwise spirituality takes flight into abstraction and only exacerbates the problem of alienation from the natural world that human subjectivity is so evidently compelled to perform.

The abiding value of nature-mysticism is that physicality and spirituality mutually enhance one another's presentness to such an extent that material reality cannot be extricated from the immaterial, and vice versa. In nature-mysticism, reality is so suffused with ineffability to such an extent that to merely to look, taste, touch, smell, even think, is to have a religious experience, to undergo the divine shudder. That ineffability is inherent to the natural world: it is an essential part of nature's expressive power just as colour and scent and light are, as human subjectivity learns, through intercorporeal engagement with the sensuous world, to awaken itself to. The sacred, ineffable qualities of the natural-world are not invented and then applied to the natural-world by the genius of human subjectivity. The sacred is always present and pre-dates humanity and will carry on expressing itself post-humanity. Nature-mysticism teaches human subjectivity to be present to the presence of sacredness. It does not support the idea that the sacred is absent from the natural-world. Nature, as expression of the divine, is the nature-mystic's *machina mentis*.

I will focus primarily on the sea as a geographical landscape wherein Thomas became increasingly aware of the presence of God and the processes whereby a landscape reveals its holiness. I am going to show how Thomas was led through

⁸⁹ This is a term I have invented from Mircea Eliade's term for the manifestation of sacredness: Hierophany.

particular experiences of the sea and of God's intimated presence, eventually culminating in his absorption and union with the divine, taking his dwelling-place in the Landscape of Ultimate Reality.

Thomas's search for a more authentic mode of life in touch with divine creation speaks to us now amidst the desacralising, proliferation of dominating modes of technology that eclipse the vulnerable beauty of the earth. R. S. Thomas, I believe, commits himself to the imperative of re-inventing what it means to be human. His personal capacity to receive the presence of God through the medium of nature and for nature, in turn, to be a presence that demands humility and reverence is what is lacking in our spiritually jaded society.

The poetry of Thomas arises out of his participation in the divine universe which exists beyond comprehension and the clutch of objectification. The poems of R. S. Thomas can inspire the necessity for modern man to re-invent his own sense of what it means to be human and have intelligence which is so lacking in ecological and spiritual wisdom. Thomas Berry says that:

We no longer hear the voice of the rivers, the mountains, or the sea. The trees and meadows are no longer intimate modes of spirit presence...we continue to make music, write poetry, and do our painting and sculpture and architecture, but these activities easily become aesthetic expressions simply of the human. They lose the intimacy and radiance and awesome qualities of the universe...However we think of our art or literature, its power is there in the wonder communicated most directly by the meadow or the mountains, by the sea of the stars in the night.⁹⁰

For me, as it was for R. S. Thomas, poetry that is lacking in its communion with the universe is not poetry at all but a mere human version of poetry. The sacredness of the universe is not only integral to human consciousness but also it is the true fount of human expression.

By the end of this chapter, the picture of consciousness that will arise is like that of Coleridge's description of consciousness in his notebooks. The flowering of sacral consciousness is also the flowering of ecological consciousness, two flowers

⁹⁰ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into The Future*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 1999, p. 21.

situated within each other, enrooted together in the poet's rapt participation in the overflowing immensity of divine creation. Sacral consciousness is what Coleridge calls the 'Shechinah in the heart.' 'Shechinah,' derives from the biblical Hebrew meaning to settle, inhabit and dwell. The word also means the indwelling of the spirit of God. Sacral consciousness houses the spirit of the lord and this house is built from intimate contact with the outward world of sensuous milieu. The natural world is the holy spring that feeds the growth of spiritual consciousness. Both types of consciousness, sacral and ecological, reciprocate one another's growth toward a more comprehensive depth and breadth of union with divine creation. They do not crowd each other out in competition for the light of creation, but rather, as in the biological world of neighbouring species of certain plants, they mutually enhance one another's growth. Ecological consciousness opens spiritual consciousness out toward the natural world where spiritual consciousness opens ecological conscious out toward God. Coleridge describes the structure of this activity as:

...like some faire Blossom-life in the centre of the Flower-polyypus, a Life within Life, & constituting a part of the Life that includes it, a consciousness within a Consciousness, yet mutually penetrated, each possessing both itself & the other-distinct tho' indivisible.⁹¹

The nature-mysticism of R.S. Thomas is relevant now, arguably more than never, if a renaissance of the divine sacredness of the earth is to be achieved. We will not save what we do not love. Nasr, in *The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis*, says:

We are like a window of the house of nature through which the light and air of the spiritual world penetrates into the natural world. Once that window becomes opaque, the house of nature becomes dark. That is exactly what we are experiencing today. Once we have shut our hearts to God, darkness spreads over the whole world.⁹²

⁹¹ Samuel-Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks, A Selection*, ed. Seamus Perry, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 95.

⁹² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis*, p. 79, in *Seeing God Everywhere, Essays on Nature and the Sacred*, ed. Barry McDonald, Perennial Philosophy Series, 2003.

Thomas is a figure who continually opens his heart out toward God. In his eyes, the house of nature is full of light because as a window onto the house of nature it was necessary for him to keep the window of his self pristine and transparent. This clear window I will call the Hierophantic Self, the Self that participates in the modification of nature as a dwelling place of light and air that emanates from God. Keeping the window pristine, his heart open, requires work, upkeep and vigilance. The threat of opacity is always close by. The darkening of the house of nature is a nightmarish, possible reality. The Hierophantic Self is fundamentally integral to the maintenance of the house of nature as dwelling place of God. Only by becoming a Hierophantic Self can the house of nature reverberate with the light and air of the sacred.

I

Using the definitions of the Mystic's Way elucidated by the historian of mysticism, Evelyn Underhill, I am going to focus on the primary role that the sea has played in the spiritual development of R.S. Thomas. What the mountains were for Wordsworth, the sea was for Thomas; a landscape of supreme meaning in the evolution of his spiritual life.

With the exception of the poem 'Abersoch' which is in the 1961 collection *Tares*, which pre-dates Thomas's move to the north-west coast of Wales, I will look at a group of poems that date from the period Thomas took up residence in Aberdaron on the Lyn Peninsula in North Wales, with the final poem taken from his 1983 collection, *Later Poems*. With the exception of 'Abersoch' which was written at a time when he still resided at Elgwys-Fach, bordering Mid-Wales on the inland flanks of the River Dovey, the sea became the spiritual, sacred centre of his existence that he longed for. Haunted by memories of his childhood on the holy island of Anglesey he was compelled throughout his life to re-establish his profound, filial connection with the sea. The sea was the very locus of his spiritual and physical desire, and is the context and inspiration for what Christian Mystics call 'Oneing.'

Up until his move to the Lyn Peninsula, he had always yearned to live in sight and sound of the sea. In his autobiography, *A Year in Lyn*, he says that 'the sea is in my blood,' and

the sound of the sea, which is heard here so often, reminds me of the part that water has played in my life. After coming to live in Holyhead as a child of six I became aware of the omnipresence of the sea, and that is what I lost in moving to the church as Chirk. Thus arose the yearning within me that was to last for so long. That yearning was relieved a little by the move to Manafon where there was a river close by the rectory. That river, in all its moods, became part of my life, and I would lie in bed at night listening to it as to the blood in my veins. But it was only an intimation of the sea, and there was no satisfaction to be had until I was able to return to live beside the sea, as I did in moving to Aberdaron. And here I am towards the end of my life, listening to it once again, sometimes purring, other times snarling in Port Neigwl.⁹³

After a walk on the coastal paths that swerve high above the cliffs of Braich y Pwll, giving views of Bardsey Island asleep on the sea like a prehistoric creature in the light, and the blue distances that stretch and shimmer out toward Ireland and out into the Atlantic, it is easy to sympathise with Thomas and his life-long yearning to live in close proximity to the inhuman beauty of the ocean. It is understandable too, after a visit to the church of Aberdaron and his cottage at Sarn-Rhiw perched above Porth Neigwl, why he would settle there both as a priest and a poet. No matter where one goes on the Lyn Peninsula, the presence of the sea cannot easily be forgotten; it defines the landscape that one's senses are absorbed into. It commands attention. No wonder, then, that the most spiritually pertinent poems Thomas wrote about his relation to the sea and the God he felt through his relation to the sea arose out of his time on the Lyn Peninsula.

I want to trace, through a small batch of poems, the development of his spiritual evolution which lead him to declare:

I found a spot between the trees at the edge of Ty Mawr pool where I could stand and hear the wind roaring around me, together with the sound of the sea nearby. At moments such as these, every problem concerning the purpose of life, death and mortality disappears, and man feels in touch with existence, pure and simple. For a moment he is one with creation, participating in the genius of life, as every creature in turn has done over

⁹³ R.S. Thomas, *Autobiographies*, trans. Jason Walford Davies, Phoenix Press, 1997, p. 117-8.

millions of years. My name for such a rare, but not alien, experience is nature-mysticism.⁹⁴

The fundamental *Oneness of Being* is a typical, incommunicable experience of the nature-mystic which, rather than being an intellectual phenomenon, is an emotional one based on feelings that supersede comprehension but which, nonetheless, are concrete, real experiences. As a process, they are *ec-static* experiences, in the sense that the nature-mystic is propelled outside of himself, merging dynamically and immediately into the *All* that gives the nature-mystic a profound sense of belonging in dynamic interrelation with the divinity expressing itself through all created things.

Cases reported by nature-mystics of being absorbed into the natural world suggest a profound, spiritual connection between consciousness and nature. Not only is human being attuned to the natural world through carnality; the human being is also attuned to the natural world spiritually. R.S. Thomas is precisely one of those cases in which spirituality and reality are interrelated. Rapt in the sensuous world through the participatory rapport of his senses, the nature-mystic feels absorbed into the surroundings and uplifted into the genius of life in which his own individual self disappears and he merges into the greater Self of the universe, entirely a part of creation, in touch with God. However, this is only partly true for Thomas because for him God always remains remote from creation, intimated rather than fully grasped and apprehended. Rather than a Pantheist which claims that the universe and God are one, Thomas is more closely aligned to Panentheism which states that God, even though the touch of divinity pervades the universe, God remains beyond the universe, outside of the trappings of space and time. Thomas, then, is a nature-mystic in a manner that is in keeping with the Panentheistic tradition and I hope to show the development of his Panentheism as a being who is a part of the sacred world of creation.

Also, I am going to suggest that the spiritual development of Thomas as a nature-mystic corresponds to the development of the sea as a sacred landscape and that sacred places are gateways into 'the deepest centres of existence.'⁹⁵ The spiritual

⁹⁴ *Autobiographies*, p. 122.

⁹⁵ N.Scott Momaday, quoted by T.C. McLuhan in *The Way Of The Earth, Encounters with Nature in Ancient and Contemporary Thought*, Simon and Schuster, 1995, p. 403.

development of Thomas as a nature-mystic gives rise to an increased sensitivity to the sea as the fundamental medium through which ‘the God’ chooses to reveal itself. As a nature-mystic, his ability to receive the presence God, (which Thomas Aquinas thought critical in the religious life of man), depends upon his ability to awaken to and receive the sacred mystery of the sea that is God’s chosen medium of revelation. Receptivity of consciousness to the numinous qualities of existence is a pre-requisite of the nature-mystic. The more he is attuned to the rythms, the colours, the light, the whole sensorium of the sea, the more effectively he is able to experience the presence of God. God is intimated through the rituals of sensorial commitment. The sea becomes increasingly sacred the more he gives himself to it. The more he immerses himself in the sense-experiences of the sea, the more the unfathomable mysteries of those sense-experiences become apparent. The poet’s communion with the sea extinguishes what the Sufi Mystics call ‘the flame of separation’⁹⁶ that roars between the pilgrim and his God.

Using the classification of the stages of spiritual development from Evelyn Underhill’s seminal book ‘Mysticism,’ I want to try and plot the map of Thomas’s progression towards communion with the divine, and how on the way the sea became thoroughly and inescapably essential, and integral in the communion, and how he experienced that communion. What will hopefully become evident is how Thomas’s search for God is also the discovery of the inherent sacred qualities of the natural world revealed to him who is immersed in it. I will use Underhill’s definition of the mystic’s search as a template to work from:

the art of union with Reality; a progressive growth towards the Real, an ever more profound harmonisation of the self’s life with the greater and inclusive rythms of existence.⁹⁷

Involved within the art of union with Reality is also what I hope to show in the context of R. S. Thomas, is that the process begets a profound rejuvenation of the sacredness of the natural world. The spiritual development of Thomas as a mystic is correspondingly the spiritual resurgence of the natural a world as a sacred presence to be revered, communed with, not exploited and denigrated.

⁹⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, Wider Publications, 2008, p.2.

⁹⁷ *Practical Mysticism*, p. 10.

At the same time, in line with Mircea Eliade's account of the sacred, the sea becomes sacred a space, a place of 'an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the rest of the cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different.'⁹⁸ The earth itself is re-vivified through its re-sacralisation brought about Thomas's deepening relation to God. The sea, the mountains and moorland that Thomas found God in shine with 'a light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud enveloping the earth.'⁹⁹ The Hierophantic Self, not the self that is equated with the individual ego, registers the ubiquitous light of the sacred that clothes the things of earth and through which those things shine. Sacredness, through the eyes of the Hierophantic Self, is perceived to be the founding condition for the divine manifestation of things. By becoming more integral to creation, to nature, his ability to receive the presence of God is enhanced.

Quoted here in full, Evelyn Underhill marks out the phases of the mystical life as follows:

- 1) The awakening of the Self to consciousness of Divine Reality. This experience, usually abrupt and well-marked, accompanied by intense feelings of joy and exaltation.

- 2) The Self, aware from the first time of Divine Beauty, realizes by contrast its own finiteness and imperfection, the manifold illusions in which it is immersed, the immense distance which separates it from the One. It attempts to eliminate by discipline and mortification all that stands in the way of progress towards union with God constitute *Purgation*: a state of pain and effort.

- 3) When by Purgation the Self has become detached from the 'things of sense,' and acquired those virtues which are the 'ornaments of the spiritual marriage,' its joyful consciousness of the Transcendent Order returns in an enhance form. Like the prisoner's in Plato's 'Cave of Illusion,' it has awakened to knowledge of Reality, has struggled up the harsh and difficult path to the mouth of cave. Now it looks upon the sun. This is *Illumination*: a state which includes in itself many of the stages of contemplation, a training devised by experts which will strengthen and assist the mounting soul. Illumination is the 'contemplative state' *par excellence*. It forms, with the two preceding states, the

⁹⁸ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane, The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Harcourt, Inc. 1987, p. 26.

⁹⁹ Samuel-Taylor Coleridge, *The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson, Oxford University Press, 2000, *Dejection: An Ode*, p. 115, lines 54-5

‘first mystic life.’ Many mystics never go beyond it; and, on the other hand, many seers and artists not usually classed amongst them, have shared, to some extent, the experiences of the illuminated state. Illumination brings a certain apprehension of the Absolute, a sense of the Divine Presence: but not true union with it.

4) In the development of the great and strenuous seekers after God, this is followed- or sometimes intermittently accompanied- by the most terrible of all the experiences of the Mystic Way: the final and complete purification of the Self, which is called by some contemplatives the “mystic pain” or “mystic death,” by others the Purification of the Spirit or *Dark Night of the Soul*. The consciousness which had illumination, sunned itself in the sense of Divine Presence, now suffers under an equally intense sense of the Divine Absence: learning to dissociate the personal satisfaction of mystical vision from the reality of mystical life. As in Purgation the senses were cleansed and humbled, and the energies and interest of the Self were concentrated upon transcendental things: so now the purifying process is extended to the very centre of I-hood, the will. The human instinct for personal happiness must be killed. This is the ‘spiritual crucifixion’ so often described by the mystics: the great desolation in which the soul seems abandoned by the Divine. The Self now surrenders itself, its individuality, and its will, completely. It desires nothing, asks nothing, is utterly passive, and is thus prepared for

5) Union: the true goal of the mystic quest. In this state the absolute Life is not merely perceived and enjoyed by the Self, as in Illumination: but is *one* with it. This is the end towards which all the previous oscillations of consciousness have tended. It is a state of equilibrium, of purely spiritual life; characterised by peaceful joy, by enhanced powers, by intense certitude. To call this state, as some authorities do, by the name of Ecstasy, is inaccurate and confusing: since the term Ecstasy has long been used both by psychologists and ascetic writers to define that short and rapturous trance- a state with well-marked physical and psychical accompaniments- in which the contemplative, losing all consciousness of the phenomenal world, is caught up to a brief and immediate enjoyment of the Divine Vision. Union must be looked upon as the true goal of mystical growth; that permanent establishment of life upon transcendent level of reality, of which ecstasies give a foretaste to the soul. Intense forms of it,

described by individual mystics, under symbols such as those of Mystical marriage, Deification, of Divine Fecundity.¹⁰⁰

The aim of this chapter is use each of these phases of the Mystic's Way within the context of Thomas's *oeuvre* according to various episodes or stages where Thomas shows a particular moment of religious veneration for the sea. Nonetheless, the religious development of Thomas is much less strategically precise than the stages demarcated by Underhill. The religious progress of Thomas, although one of deepening love for the God of the sea, is replete with contradictions that often call into question and hamper his progress. As a nature-mystic his progress is governed by nature rather than his own will. Under the guidance of sensuous immersion in the natural world, the life of the sea, his spiritual progress is integral to his senses that are, as I showed in the first chapter, radically improvisatory and spontaneous. Also, what will become evident though is that the above five phases apply mostly to *pure mysticism*, which, as it states in phase two, is characterised by the subject withdrawing from the things of sense. The mysticism of Thomas is not characterised by detachment from the things of sense, that is, from the things of earth, but his religion is a personal form of mysticism that celebrates the things of sense, which is enraptured by the things of this earth. He loved, as he said, 'created things,' and God was mediated through to him by nature so that by turning to nature and immersing himself in its rhythms and sights he could enter into a mediated relation with God. God never appears in Thomas poetry as an objective, supernatural presence, or a numinous light more powerful than the actual sun, instead the presence of God is encountered only through the physical reality Thomas finds himself being immersed in. By focusing his attention on physical realities, God too, becomes a part of the physical realities, 'part of the sea-granite from whom he desires not to be fugitive.'¹⁰¹

'The Divine Fecundity,' which is mentioned in phase five and which is also stated in the passage from Thomas Merton at the heading of this chapter, is discovered by Thomas not through a turning away from the outward world of nature but by a turning aside, and then by a deeper immersion into the world of nature. Turning aside entails releasing himself from the alluring falsity of an always receding future, and leaving behind the weight of the past that can never be retrieved. To turn

¹⁰⁰ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism, A Study In The Nature And Development Of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1949, p. 169-171.

¹⁰¹ Robinson Jeffers, *The Selected Poetry*, ed. Tim Hunt. Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 584.

aside, like Moses who turned aside to the miracle of the God-lit bush, is to immerse oneself in the unfathomable present, in the here and now where the God breathes. The sea is that divine spectacle toward which Thomas turns aside, rebelling against the illusions of the past and the future, become a part of the eternal present. God, I would argue, *is* the *here and now*, the ever-replenishing fount of the present surging up through the boundless sea of a single moment. The ecstasy and rapture that mystics often describe in stepping outside of themselves and outside the parameters of the world, into God, does not apply to the case of nature-mystic. The nature-mystic unites himself with the world creation, becoming immanent to it by turning aside, by performing a paradigmatic shift in stance that seems deceptively simple, where the God of the *now* is waiting to greet him.

The five phases of the Mystic Way are a guideline in this study of Thomas's mysticism, they are not absolute rules, or a kind of Decalogue. The religious life of Thomas, instead of being clear-cut and well defined, is more like William Blake's crooked road of genius, more of a deep exploration than a concentrated aim. Thomas's personalised form of mysticism will begin to clarify as the chapter progresses.

By the end I hope to have shown that each significant encounter with the sea offered its own particular glimpse through to God. And when each moment is taken together, not in ascending stages or in a hierarchies of sacredness, but as equally valid abodes of diverse glimpses of God's presence, they form a holy, unified visionary-landscape of God of which he was an integral and active part. Each significant episode of wonder for the sea will be discussed in turn using the appropriate stages of spiritual development, thereby charting the growth of Thomas's spiritual consciousness and the making sacred of the natural world.

I will also argue, and which will be implied throughout the whole chapter, that the necessary need of Thomas's veneration for the sacred earth and creatures of the earth is also what is required of modern man if there is to be a paradigmatic shift in modern man's general attitude toward the natural world. The undiminishing, contemporary relevance of Thomas's philosophy and his poetry is exactly this: the promotion toward the re-sacralization of the natural world.

Repeatedly in his poems, R. S. Thomas, shows that love of the real leads to an awareness of God and an awareness of God means the real is imbued with sacredness. Spiritual consciousness does not relegate the earth to commercial utilisation but

reveres the earth as a life-force which is to be communed with and worshipped, thereby placing the earth beyond the degrading reach of domestication and abuse. Spiritual consciousness is nourished by the wild transcendence of the earth.

II

The Sea

Do they ever meet out there,
 The dolphins I counted,
 The otter I wait for?
 I should have spent my life
 Listening to the waves.¹⁰²

'Out There,' Michael Longley

The sea figures in the poetry of R.S. Thomas as an immense plane of possibility for him to encounter the presence of God that Thomas often describes as a darkness, rather than a light. The poet's intimate styles of communion with the sea—listening, looking, watching, waiting, tasting the salt-spray on the tongue and feeling its cold wave-flung vapours rising up as a tart scent-spray around to his nose—are ways or natural techniques of participating in the life of the sea as a medium or abode of the presence of God.

The rhythms and pattern of Thomas's search for God in his relation to the sea seems to partake in the breathing movement of the sea itself. At times he withdraws into himself, and at times advances outside of himself and into communion with the physical world. There is a kind of systole-diastole movement to his search for God, an expansive, extroverted and contracted, introverted movement that echoes the movements of the sea. But the presence of God seems to be felt as though it lived eccentric to this movement, as though God himself were the transcendent orchestrator and creator of the immanent rhythms between consciousness and the sea. The first poem that I will look at is 'Abersoch.'

¹⁰² Michael Longley, 'Out There,' in *Collected Poems*, Cape Poetry, 2006, p. 240.

There was that headland, asleep on the sea,
 The air full of thunder, and the far air
 brittle with lightning; there was that girl
 Riding her cycle, hair at half-mast,
 And the men smoking, the dinghies at rest
 On the calm tide. There were people going
 about their business, while the storm grew
 louder and nearer and did not break.

Why do I remember these few things
 That were rumours of life, not life itself
 That was being lived fiercely, where the storm raged?
 Was it just that the girl smiled,
 Though not at me, and the men smoking
 Had the look of those who have come safely home?¹⁰³

The first phase of the growth of consciousness toward divinity 'is the awakening of the Self to consciousness of Divine Reality. This experience, usually abrupt and well-marked, is accompanied by intense feelings of joy and exaltation.'

'Abersoch' is taken from the 1961 collection *Tares*, and is the first poem to that date that deals with the sea as a spiritual landscape. Although not overtly religious in its tone and imagery it nonetheless, on a closer reading, reveals the first steps toward consciousness awakening to a presence greater than in its own.

According to Matthew 13-24-30, during the final judgement the angels will separate 'the sons of the evil one' (tares) from the sons of the Kingdom of God, the wheat. In the context of 'Abersoch,' the poet seems to be located between two fields of perception: tares- the rumours of life, and the wheat- life itself. To become accepted into the kingdom of God, he must separate himself from the field of tares, and open his eyes as though he were among a field of wheat. However, the struggle to cast of a field of spiritual perception in a favour of the other field of perception is made apparent. Straddled between them both, he has one eye in a world of wheat and one eye in a world of tares. However, to unite them, rather than separate them, becomes the poet's vexing project. The Kingdom of God is to be found growing among the Kingdom of Earth.

Two planes of reality are set up in juxtaposition to one another where the poet is eccentric to them both. There is the compelling, extraordinary reality of the brooding storm over the sea, and the compelling, ordinary reality of the dinghies,

¹⁰³ R.S. Thomas, 'Tares,' in *Collected Poems, 1945-1990*, Phoenix, 1993, p. 106.

the men and the girl. Using the terminology of religious historian, Mircea Eliade, these two places of reality are ‘the sacred,’ and ‘the profane.’ Abersoch, the place to which the poems refers, is a stage where both aspects of the performance of these realities is played out before the poet as though he were the only audience, a witness of the world in the honed out privilege of his solitude.

In the poem, the onlooker is aware of the troublesome incipience of the storm and also of the people who are blissfully oblivious to the storm. He is aware of both a sacred and a profane world hanging in a balance and he is equally remote from both of them. It is as though he stands back to gain a perspective on his spiritual possibilities.

In a limbo, aware of both the rumour of life and life itself, the question becomes, how to get through to life itself? Decentred and extricated from the rumours of life by the girl who doesn’t focus her attention on him and the men who have come home, the need to participate in more authentic and rooted existence becomes a pressing issue. Quietly apocalyptic, (apocalypse means ‘unveiling,’) and discreetly distressing in its mood, the poem is a painting of one who is aware of a greater, more authentic life stirring on the fringe of ordinary, everyday perception. The sacred world has manifested itself as an objective presence in the guise of a storm over the sea.

As I have previously indicated the process whereby the sacred manifests itself is termed, to use Mircea Eliade’s terminology, ‘hierophany.’ And yet, the storm, although coming in closer, does not break. Thereby the full manifestation of the sacred is withheld, conveying an atmospheric sense of accumulative tension. The storm is a *remote hierophany*, a distant sacredness that is on the brink of becoming manifest, or withdrawing back into hidden and dormant, volcanic latency.

The clue is also in the place name, Abersoch, where the River Soch cutting down through the Lyn Peninsula in North Wales, opens out into the Irish Sea. In the context of the poem, *Abersoch* becomes to mean a place of opening and awakening, the small river of human consciousness moving out into the immensity of cosmic consciousness. The geography of the place is symbolic of his own being. Unlike the men, the poet does not wear the look of one who has come safely come. He seems to express the definition of the place itself, a place of transition, of unsettlement. The expression that he paints of himself is one who is fraught with a quiet but disturbing homesickness. He has yet to open out to the storm, he is on the agonising

cusp of immensity caught, almost free from the net of rumours. There is a connection here with his poem 'The Porch,' in which a man is stuck on the threshold of the sacred and profane:

Do you want to know his name?
It is forgotten. Would you learn
what he was like? He was like
anyone else, a man with ears
and eyes. Be it sufficient
that in a church porch on an evening
in winter, the moon rising, the frost
sharp, he was driven
to his knees and for no reason
he knew. The cold came at him;
his breath was carved angularly
as the tombstones; an owl screamed.

He had no power to pray.
His back turned on the interior
he looked out on a universe
that was without knowledge
of him and kept his place
there for an hour on that lean
threshold, neither outside nor in.¹⁰⁴

Here, as in 'Abersoch,' he is on the cusp of interior retreat or exterior salvation, driven into disability between the two. On one level, Abersoch is a liminal place, between land and sea, a harbour where people leave from and come to. On another level, it is liminal place between hierophany and profanity. Abersoch is a gateway to both levels of life.

Either the poet is swallowed up and liberated by larger whole or ensnared and lost in the smaller life of rumours that shuffle to and fro along the harbour wall. The storm, the real life, brooding over the sea does not come any nearer, he, therefore, must go out and meet it. The revelation stops short of absorption. He must undo his own self by the grace of nature and actively devote his life to what Michael Longley never could do. He should spend his life listening to the waves, the pulses of the presence of God over which the signals of the storm rises, swells and grows. His vocation becomes Hierophant of the sea.

¹⁰⁴ R.S. Thomas, 'The Porch,' *Collected Poems, 1945- 1990*, Phoenix, 1993, p. 326.

At first, however the reader is led to think that the smiling girl, and the men come home, are people inhabiting a profane world, unaware of the storm's display of hierophany. Is there a chance, however, that the girl is smiling because she knows something that he does not? On first glance, the smile may be symptomatic of a blissful ignorance, but we are forced to ask ourselves, if she is not looking at him, is she looking at the storm overhead, is she secretly aware of the storm? Is she content because she is already living in a sacred world that, ironically, he is blind to? Does he remember the rumour of life because the rumours of life are, in fact, the authentic facts of life? The poem leads the reader into an ambivalence of perception. The juxtaposition between the sacred and profane world is not as clear-cut as it first seems. It is as though the storm of sacredness has already pervaded through Abersoch.

Here, in this poem, is the deciding factor that defines Thomas as a nature-mystic rather than a pure mystic as such. Although spiritually awakened by the incoming storm of holiness, he cannot turn away from the ordinary life of people in the village of Abersoch. He, as a nature-mystic, a poet in fact, is equally rapt by the sacredness of the everyday even if he merely considers them rumours, rumours, indeed, that speak of a more authentic life that they already speak of in inconspicuous gestures. Smiling back at the girl and witnessing the storm that is pregnant with divinity are equal in terms of spiritual tenor.

To clarify what is going on in the poem in an interview, philosopher Max Oeschlager is asked what the sacred means to him, he says that:

It's the relinking, the rediscovery, the reconnection of the little point of light, the sentience that you are, with the totality. If you are open, if you can somehow keep clear in your mind how much of your being has been socially defined, then you can continually slip through the cracks of that social definition and encounter the sacred. You can see the sacred in a baby's smile and in the caress of a mother's lips on a baby's forehead. You can see the sacred in the glimmer of satisfaction that comes when a student suddenly makes a breakthrough in a problem of logic. You can encounter the sacred in the tinkle of a wind chime in the wind. You can experience the sacred by raising your vision from the horizon and seeing Venus perched on the end of

the new moon. It's all around us, it's just we get caught up in the artifice of our cultural conditioning that it eludes us.¹⁰⁵

Making the world sacred involves finding that personal point of light and clicking it back into place into the numinous totality of creation. Thomas Merton re-iterates this when he says:

At the centre of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our son-ship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of the sun...¹⁰⁶

The sacred worlds and profane worlds are not diametrically opposed as it might seem on a first reading of the poem. Sacredness is imbued throughout the profane world and can be experienced as such only if the subject becomes aware of this. 'The awakening of the Self to consciousness of Divine reality,' does not entail that self turning away from the immediate things of experience. To answer the poet's questions, he remembers the rumour of life because what remembers them is in fact the self that sees 'life-itself,' right before his very eyes and this self, receptive to sacredness, nags at him to do the same. The spiritual quest that results in this is the journey to uncover the self that encounters divinity in the everyday world. If only he were to 'cleanse the doors of perception' to quote Blake, then everything would appear as it is, 'holy.'

The poem 'Abersoch' marks out the need for the poet to get in touch with the sacredness of the everyday. Also, in a sense, the poem describes the start of a spiritual conversion. He is stood on the threshold, struggling between two apparently discrepant modes of life. Between sea and land, stood in the gateway of

¹⁰⁵ Max Oelschlaeger in conversation with Derek Jensen from *Listening to the Land*, quoted in *The Sacred Earth, Writers on Nature & Spirit*, ed. Jason Gardner, New World Library, p. 138.

¹⁰⁶ The Thomas Merton Reader, ed. Robert Inchausti. New Seeds Publications, 2005, p. 136.

Abersoch, towards which way will he be converted? As we shall see throughout the poems of Thomas, the world-without and the world-within are continually on a balance where his own self serves as the fulcrum. The inner worlds of his individual self and the outer world of inhuman nature are always in a dialogue with one another. Abersoch, as a place, is the exterior version of his own self. Evelyn Underhill quotes Starbuck, another historian of mysticism, on the subject of conversion:

Conversion is primarily an unselfing. The first birth of the individual is into his own little world. He is controlled by the deep seated instincts of self-preservation and self-enlargement- instincts which are, doubtless, a direct, inheritance from his brute ancestry. The universe is organised around his own personality as a centre. Conversion, then, is the larger world-consciousness now pressing in on the individual consciousness. Often it breaks in suddenly and becomes a great new revelation. This is the first aspect of conversion: the person emerges from a smaller limited world of existence into a larger world of being. His life becomes swallowed up in a larger whole.¹⁰⁷

Conversion as defined by Starbuck is similar to the sacred as defined Oeschlager. Conversion into the sacred is very much a process. In the poem, the larger world consciousness is the storm pressing down upon his smaller consciousness but his smaller conscious, paradoxically, doesn't unite with the storm but is forced down by the storm to remember the rumours of life, not life itself. Thomas's conversion is earth-bound, fixed down into reality. The *Mysterium Tremendum* of the storm screws his mind down into the boards and timbers of reality. And yet, as we shall see, that larger world consciousness is always trying to unscrew that mind and hurl it into the spaces of the ineffable.

'Abersoch' is about the pressing need to uncover the Self that perceives and is a part of the sacred and the divine in the everyday. Commonality does not necessarily equate to profanity. It is quite the opposite in this case. Also, 'Abersoch' marks the beginning of the subject's turning towards the sea that keeps consciousness vast and yet centred on the unfathomable depths of reality.

¹⁰⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism, A Study In The Nature And Development Of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1949, p. 176.

In 'Abersoch,' the poet became aware of the need to discover a more authentic mode of Self in touch with hierophany of the commonplace. Not to be a mere onlooker straddled between spiritual uncertainty and desacralised certainty, but to be an active part of the course of being generated by the intersecting planes of transcendence and immanence - the storm and the ground becomes the existential, spiritual project now facing Thomas. He turns toward the sea, as both an interior and an exterior landscape, which can deliver him from his own sense of spiritual anxiety that is ruled by the self of myopic ignorance. He must become the impersonal Self of divine creation through his own alienated self locked in the bad solitude of profane subjectivity.

But we must be careful of not reducing the sea to a mere human idea and symbol. We are talking about the sea itself here. Unless when Thomas turns inward on himself to uncover the knowledge that will bring him closer to God, actual contact with God is reached through engagement with outward physical, sensuous realities independent of his own consciousness.

III

After 'Abersoch,' the ensuing trajectory of Thomas's consciousness in relation to the sea is one of alternate searches that go out to the sea itself and go in the sea of his interior world. He turns in to turn out. God, though, is always felt to be of the outward world, but he must in order to be in contact with that style of divine presence, find the correct self that is located within his own, interior depths.

After reading 'Abersoch' the question that is left hanging in the air is, how to get through to life itself? He must discover the Hierophantic Self that will link him up through the particulars of the commonplace with the divine totality of divine creation. He must find the Self, the glowing I, that is already, lost within the darkness of his individual self, an expression of divine creation.

The next poem that speaks of Thomas's spiritual quest in relation to the sea is 'This to Do.'

I have this that I must do
 One day: overdraw on my balance
 Of air, and breaking the surface
 Of water go down into the green

Darkness to search for the door
 To myself in dumbness and blindness
 And uproar of scared blood
 At the eardrums. There are no signposts
 There but bones of the dead
 Congor, no light but the pale
 phosphorous where the slow corpses
 swag. I must go down with the poor
 purse of my body and buy courage
 paying for it with the coins of my breath.¹⁰⁸

This is the ‘state of pain and effort’ that constitutes the second phase of the Mystic’s way as delineated by Underhill. Spiritual growth, in order to flourish, requires descent, a rooting around and a blinded archaeology of depths that have yet to be explored.

The poem presents the reader with levels of inward depth. The poem describes the blind movement from self to Self. First of all, there is the level of air, the level of self-consciousness where physical commerce is held with the exterior world that gives him the biological nourishment to grow and live. It also the level at which the ego, the profane self, operates. Eliminating the narrow ego requires that he must give up everything, even his senses and body, in order that he discover the door to the Self. He must suffer the extreme limitations of his own being in order that he be delivered into the limitless Self that is God’s creation. It is a process of purification and cleansing.

As Underhill describes in phase two, it is a process of ‘rending apart of the hard tissues of I-hood and vivid disclosures of the poverty of the finite self.’ This process is triggered when, to quote Richard Jefferies, ‘I feel on the margin of a life unknown, very near, almost touching it - on the verge of powers which, if I could grasp, would give men an immense breadth of existence.’¹⁰⁹ Thomas, too, is called forth by the imperative to step out of the margin and take the plunge into unknown depths wherein the door to the Hierophantic Self is located.

He overdraws on the limited balance of air that is allocated to him, and uses up a limited resource, quickening the rate of his mortality. It is imperative that he does this, but the question becomes, when? The imperative to act is fraught with uncertainty and procrastination. He will do it ‘one day.’ His preparedness to act is

¹⁰⁸ R.S. Thomas, ‘Pieta’ in *Collected Poems 1945-1990*, Phoenix, 1993, p. 157.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Jefferies, *The Story of My Heart*, Green Books, 2011, p.31.

disrupted by his inability to be decisive and the search for a true self becomes a fantasy to be done at some point in the future. The poem is the description of an inward fantasy, a plan and strategy for a future search.

The descent into himself is merely imagined. In true life, he remains at the first level, only in imagination has he made the inward descent. For all that, he nonetheless admits it must be done in reality and to do this he needs courage to go beyond mere fantasy and take the plunge under actual circumstances. It is as if he imagines the descent to prepare himself for it. Is this good or bad? Has imagination here, the creation of this murky fantasy, led him astray? Imagination, here, is a safety rail that he can hold onto above the real depths. To be spiritually courageous, as the poem implies, is to let go of that safety rail and not to depend on the imagination's deft and convincing lie. Simon Weil, in her *Gravity and Grace*, says that:

There is a distinction between those who remain inside the cave, shutting their eyes and imagining the journey, and those who really take it. In the spiritual realm also we have real and imaginary, and there also it is necessity which makes the difference - not simply suffering, because there are imaginary sufferings. As for inner feelings, nothing is more deceptive.¹¹⁰

Indeed, the real necessity of it is not fantasised. He *will* do it in real life. This planning of his eventual descent is only preliminary. As in 'Abersoch,' Thomas is caught once again in a dilemma of spiritual discovery. To discover the Hierophantic Self requires real discovery, not a fantasised one. It is only rumoured about. The fantasy arises out of a fear to do what must be done. This state of pain and effort, this 'purgation' as Underhill calls it has not been, in actuality, gone through. It has only been mapped. Discovery of the Hierophantic Self that will lead him to God depends on his ability to be courageous and confront what is real. It is not metaphorical. Do we believe him that he will one day make the descent?

This poem typifies Thomas's search for the Hierophantic Self that belongs to divine creation- the struggle to be decisive and sincere about the search. The discovery of the Hierophantic Self must go beyond shallow egotism where

¹¹⁰ Simon Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford, Routledge London and New York, 2007 p. 18.

imagination spins its web of image and rumour. God is creator of what is real. The Hierophantic Self is real. Thomas Merton says that:

The way to find the 'real world' is not merely to measure and observe what is outside us, but to discover our own inner ground. For that is where the world is, *first* of all: in my deepest self. This 'ground' this 'world' where I am mysteriously present at once to my own self and to the freedoms of all other men, is not a visible, objective, determined structure with fixed laws and demands. It is a living and self-creating mystery of which I am myself a part, to which I am myself my own unique door.¹¹¹

Father Thomas Berry reiterates this when he says that 'each being in its subjective depths carries that numinous mystery whence the universe emerges into being. This we might identify as the sacred depth of the individual.'¹¹² Thomas's attempt to discover the door to his own inner ground, the primordial ground of his being, is also an attempt to discover the world of which his own being is a part, the sacred depth of his own individuality which is the sacred depth of the world. The discovery of the Hierophantic Self is also the discovery of the hierophantic world: the general hierophany of existence. It is a search for the primordial unity of existence breathed into life by God. The way into it is through his own self. No signposts lead there, no light guides his way. The search is a senseless groping. To go down is to risk the chance of both losing contact with the world of bodily life above and never finding the door into himself. If this were to happen, he would experience the death of two worlds, the sacred and the profane. He would be trapped in a purgatorial hell of meaninglessness and decay, sharing a world with the bones of the dead congor and the corpses of those who, presumably like him, got lost in the search. The sea, then, is a place of potential revelation and discovery, and a place of immolation and loss.

The reader continually feels the impression that the poet must one day go down into the murky underworld within, that this nightmarish place he is talking

¹¹¹ The Thomas Merton Reader, ed. Robert Inchausti, New Seeds Publications, 2005, p. 136.

¹¹² Thomas Berry, *The Great Work, Our Way Into The Future*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 1999, p. 24.

about is an interior sea. However, there is a chance that this inner sea is not wholly interior. The reader presumes that he must go down into himself but there is no overarching evidence to suggest that this is wholly the case. What about if the watery depths he is referring to are in fact the sea itself? If we read the poem along these lines then the search for the Self does not take place within, but rather without. The sea could be taken to mean the natural world as a whole, the 'green darkness,' and that by immersing himself into the natural world, by losing himself within it, he may find the door to his Hierophantic Self, the *inner sanctum*.

I am suggesting that the poem embraces both types of spiritual exercise, that the search for the door to his Hierophantic Self is at one both an interior and an exterior journey. As we shall see, this double searching movement between exterior and interior world is essential to the understanding of Thomas's spiritual journey. They are both sides of the same coin.

The search for the Hierophantic Self which will lead him to God, the divine creator, is respective of the mystic's growing awareness of a deeper, more authentic Self illuminated by him becoming aware of his own illusions created by a profane self that blocks the way to God. Thomas has awoken to the imperative of discovering the Hierophantic Self. There is a clear spiritual progression from the embryonic spirituality as described in 'Abersoch.' He must endure the states of pain and effort in order that he is purged of falsehood and rises up through the door as the 'I' pursued in the hands of divine creation. 'This to Do' is about the search to discover the Hierophantic self, that little point of light, that is a part of the immense numinosity of creation.

Self-knowledge is described as a perilous search into the unknown depths of his own being that turn out to be the unknown depths of every other being that lies on the way to the searched for self-knowledge. These depths are shared with corpses that were once living people and the bones of the dead congor that fed and thrived here. The depths into which he must sink are not the depths of his own personal being; they are the impersonal depths of all beings on earth. The search for the door into to his Hierophantic Self goes down through a depth that is a landscape of both the inner and outer worlds, a collective, purgatorial depth of non-being that is the way to the door into the Self. The space and place between his own personal self, the narrow cave of the ego, and the Self of divine creation is both an interior and an

exterior plane of non-being. At worst, to go through it is to risk losing touch with both levels of being. The German mystic Meister Eckhart said that:

A man has many skins in himself, covering the depths of his heart. Man knows so many things; he does not know himself. Why, thirty or forty skin or hides, just like an ox's or a bear's, so thick and hard, cover the soul. Go into your own ground and learn to know yourself there.¹¹³

What about the door? Does he belong to his own *inner sanctum*? One could imagine that the door is put there by God and is always open but is hard to find due the darkening, muddying effects of the ego blinding itself from the central *theophany* of his *inner sanctum*. He must endure his own darkness in order to come into the knowledge that is the door to the light of God.

IV

So far, the pattern of the Thomas search for the Hierophantic Self has been one of both advancement and withdrawal. The incipient *Mysterium Tremendum* of the storm brooding above Abersoch village, awoke him to obey the necessary search for self-knowledge, which lead him to turn inward into the disturbing depths of non-being through which the door to the Self is located.

Underhill has pure mysticism in mind which demands of the subject that when he or she becomes aware of a divine reality he or she, in order to be a part of that divine reality, must abstract his or her self from the things of the sense that are constitutive of the fallen world. Thomas, however, even though he does go through periods of introspection, does turn out towards the things of the sense because, after all, God is mediated to him through the senses. The inner and outer worlds are critically important to Thomas in his spiritual progress. Moments of reflection are balanced out by moments of sensation and immersion. Both movements, cognitively and bodily, inform and deepen one another's unique perspective on the situation. The sacredness of the natural world that can be recovered cannot be achieved by wholly turning out toward the natural world, and it cannot be achieved by wholly turning away from the natural world. A re-

¹¹³ Meister Eckhart quoted in Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, Harper Perennial, 2009, p. 85.

sacralisation of the natural world is achieved by the mediation of an equanimity between inner and outer worlds. Thomas must undergo a radical change within himself that requires constant chipping and wearing away then putting those discoveries to the test, presenting them to the natural world. We do get a strong sense that Thomas is getting close to discovering a primordial version of himself that perceives the natural world as suffused with divinity, but only the Hierophantic Self can perceive this.

After turning inward and down into the submarine depths of a collective level of non-being in which the door to the Self is located, he turns out again to the sea itself, undergoing a radical alteration in the way he perceives things which, as Underhill says, is the state of 'Illumination.'

Sea-Watching

Grey waters, vast
 as an area of prayer
 that one enters. Daily
 over a period of years
 I have let the eye rest on them.
 Was I waiting for something?
 Nothing
 but that continuous waving
 that is without meaning
 occurred.
 Ah, but a rare bird is
 rare. It is when one is not looking,
 at times one is not there
 that it comes.
 You must wear your eyes out,
 as others their knees.
 I became the hermit
 of the rocks, habited with the wind
 and the mist. There were days,
 so beautiful the emptiness
 it might have filled,
 its absence
 was as its presence; not to be told
 any more, so single my mind
 after its long fast,
 my watching from praying.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ R.S. Thomas, *Laboratories of the Spirit in Collected Poems 1945-1990*, Phoenix, 1993, p. 306.

By donating his time and self to the corrosive powers of the sea, watching ripens into prayer, as though to watch were to pray with open, attentive eyes. Watching perceives the discontinuity between the sea and God, but when watching, by prolonged vigilance and sensual participation in the sea, watching is transfigured into prayer so that a stream of continuity runs between himself, the sea, and God. Here the poet is devotedly attending to the possibility of God's presence that, by radical alteration of the way he perceives the world, becomes an actuality. His very perception of the world undergoes a radical change not by a sudden flash of revelatory knowledge but by a slow working and eroding away of his outmoded vision, a movement from what Meister Eckhart called 'evening knowledge to morning knowledge,' and what Aristotle called the swing from *mathein* to *pathein*, learning of the ineffable, to experience of the ineffable, respectively.

Physical poverty, the wearing away of the eyes in the exercise of prolonged vigil, just as the sea wears away rock and wood, leads to spiritual enrichment. Rather than seeing with the eyes, by the end, he sees through the eyes, through the encrusted veil of his narrow subjectivity. Worn thin by an ascetic advancement in the sea, his eyes become transparent, pristine, clear to let the light and air of the sacred ring in, become the eyes of prayer, echoing William Blake when he says:

when the sun rises, do you not see a round disc of fire
somewhat like a guinea? 'O no no, I see an
innumerable company of the heavenly host crying,
'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.' I
question not my corporeal or vegetative eye any more
than I would question a window concerning sight. I
look through it and not with it.¹¹⁵

To see through the eye is to see beyond the cave of the ego into a deeper, more mysterious and unfathomable reality that man can barely comprehend but which is the abode of his soul. It is to see oneself transported toward God. By learning to see through his eye, Thomas achieves that type of which vision does not apprehend duality in the world but is concentrated on the continuous rhythms of the universe.

¹¹⁵ William Blake quoted in R.S. Thomas, *Selected Prose*, ed. Sandra Anstey., Seren Press 1995, p. 120.

In the poem, God's absence is not absence as such, but the way God appears. The way God appears is absence, a presence of absence that is apprehended not through senses alone but the sense re-arranged into faculties of prayer. His corporeal eyes become vectors of holiness. But they are eyes that do not belong to him alone but eyes given to him by the sea, mediated to him through the sea by God. Sight, in essence, is a gift. Prayer is a kind of sight that apprehends God as a presence of absence. Sense-experience in prolonged communion with the sea is given the gift of sight as prayer.

Daily, like a ritual, he lets his eye rest on the grey, hallowed waters that is perceived to be consecrated ground, 'an area of prayer,' but which has explicit meaning because it is still remote from him even though he is there day in day out, present and devoted. Eventually, sensual participation invokes religious valor in which both himself and the sea are a part. But in order for his perception of things to become a kind of sacramental vision he must wear his eyes out as other do their knees. He must exhaust his eyes of their tendency to see the world apart from himself, and their tendency too of announcing his presence to the world and thereby forcing the rarity of god not to announce himself, as though the 'I' scares the God away. He must become absent, merged into the rocks and erased by mist. And in this self-depreciation, and self-inflicted poverty of sight, his poor vision blooms into prayer. Simon Weil expresses the requirement of self-eradication in order for the subject to live beyond the cleave of duality:

May I disappear in order that those things that I see
may become perfect in their beauty from the very fact
that they are no longer things that I see.

I do not in the least wish that this created world should
fade from my view, but it should no longer be to me
personally that it shows itself. To me it cannot tell its
secret which is too high. If I go, then the creator and
the creature will exchange their secrets

To see a landscape as it is when I am not there...

When I am in any place, I disturb the silence of
heaven and earth by my breathing and beating of
heart.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ *Gravity and Grace*, p.107.

The less he is of himself the more he enters into communion with God. This process of self-diminishment is also the augmenting process of the sacredness of the sea. The less he is the more he partakes in nature which the medium of God. The hierophany of the sea is manifested more fully by his religious devotion not only to the activity of the sea itself but also to the wearing away of his personal self trapped in the by-standing, individualism of 'watching.' Watching ripened into prayer means a transcending of his ego and entering into the boundless stream of continuity that runs through the world from the spring of his self and into the sea of God.

By become immanent to the sacred space of the sea, the sea rather than a remote 'area of prayer that one enters,' becomes his actual situation. Before his change of sight, he did not take part in the sea's hierophany, he merely watched, disengaged from it. By the end, he takes his place as the one at prayer in the sea's area of prayer. Together they form an organic, consecrated area built upon the foundations of palpability, erected toward God. Atoned in this way, both place of prayer and the one at prayer ratify one another's function. The sea that was without meaning becomes meaningful because he has brought about the necessary change within himself for him to take his place in the world's proliferation of sacredness. The hierophanic unity of which the sea and himself are a part is offered up like a bouquet towards God, the bouquet of a single flower that brings us back to Coleridge's quote regarding the nestling of ecological consciousness into sacral consciousness. Unity of being is a gift earned and won then given to God.

In his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James quotes a case that is similar to the experience of Thomas as one who is engaged to the organic world, becomes one at prayer, a seer, delivered unto the God by the valorisation of sight:

I was alone upon the seashore as all these thoughts flowed over me, liberating and reconciling; and now again, as once before in distant days in the Alps of Dauphine, I was impelled to kneel down, this time before the illimitable ocean, symbol of the Infinite. I felt that I prayed as I had never prayed before, and knew now what prayer really is: to return from the solitude of individuation into the consciousness of unity with all that is, to kneel down as one that passes away, and to rise up as one imperishable. Earth,

heaven, and sea resounded as in one vast world-
encircling harmony. . .¹¹⁷

Although, not strictly aligned to the experience of Thomas, nonetheless, they share essential affinities that are indicative of a consciousness made susceptible to mystic experiences. 'Watching' is indicative of a consciousness locked within itself, but when watching flowers into prayer, consciousness is freed of the restraints of representative isolation and partakes in the liberating expanse of a unified world. Prayer is the way the Hierophantic Self sees the world. Ordinary sense-experience is transfigured into a kind of sacramental perception by the emergence of sacredness.

V

'Sea-Watching,' is the first poem, too, that speaks of a 'presence' in relation to the sea. The sense of a 'presence' is characteristic of the stage of illumination that the mystic goes through on the venture of his union toward what Thomas called 'Ultimate Reality.'

The sense of a presence comes about as a result of the mystic's clarity of vision. The phenomenal world takes on an enhanced, spiritual significance due to the purification and simplification of his own self. The Hierophantic Self he has become registers modes of life that exist beyond the myopic vision of the profane self. An increased sense of the sacrality of the natural world is also an awakening to the presence of a personal presence that haunts the world.

There is an abundance of evidence taken from indigenous cultures, poets and mystics across all ages and cultures that talk of the reality of a 'presence' that lives and move amidst the natural world. Clarification of vision, concentration of consciousness upon the phenomenal world seems to awaken the mystic to apprehending a 'presence' that is at once both native and remote from the phenomenal world.

In 'Sea-Watching' the rare bird echoes that of Genesis, where it says 'Darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the

¹¹⁷ William James, *The Varieties Of Religious Experience*, ed. Martin E. Marty, Penguin Books, 1985, p. 62.

face of the waters.’ Underhill says that consciousness of a ‘presence,’ ‘is perhaps the most constant characteristic of Illumination.’ For instance, Wordsworth, in a state of illumination, spoke of a ‘a presence that disturbs me with the joy/ Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfused,/ Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, /And the round ocean, and the living air...’

William James documents many cases in which people in highly developed states of mystical consciousness receive visitations of a presence that is as real and, at times, even more insistent and palpably shocking as the immediate world of sense-experience. At once ineffable and with a fashion of manifestation that defies discursive knowledge, the incommunicable sense of the presence possesses what James calls a ‘noetic quality,’ that appeals not to the discursive intellect but to a deeper order of knowing that the mystic has calibrated. To support his analysis of the mystic’s susceptibility to other, deeper orders of knowing, of another reality of things within the known reality of things, James mentions the case of an informant who states that:

Quite early in the night I was awakened...I felt as if I had been aroused intentionally, and at first thought some one was breaking into the house...I then turned on my side to go to sleep again, and immediately felt a consciousness of a presence in the room, and singular to state, it was not the consciousness of a live person, but of a spiritual presence. This may provoke a smile, but I can tell you the facts as they occurred to me. I do not know how to better describe my sensations than by simply stating that I felt a consciousness of a spiritual presence....¹¹⁸

It isn’t necessary to go into the psychology of these cases but it does show that Thomas is not alone in the history of mysticism in experiencing the sense of a ‘presence.’ His experiences are part of a tradition that defies ‘ordinary’ modes of consciousness and shows that consciousness itself is just as mysterious in its operations as the experience of immaterial mystery itself.

¹¹⁸ E. Guernsey quoted in William James, *The Varieties Of Religious Experience*, ed. Martin E. Marty, Penguin Classics, 1985, p. 62.

It is as though the presence is a personalised form of the impersonal divinity of the universe. William James quotes Tennyson in saying:

Moreover, something is or seems,
That touches me with mystic gleams,
Like glimpses of forgotten dreams -

Of something felt, like something here;
Of something done, I know not where;
Such as no language may declare.¹¹⁹

Shelley, too, spoke of an unseen power that ‘floats tho’ unseen amongst us,’ and is ‘dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.’¹²⁰ Thomas’s ‘sense of a presence’ is integral to the religious valorisation of the natural world and it is also integral to his spiritual development as a nature-mystic. The intimate rapport of an ineffable and yet concrete presence is nowhere more succinctly described than in ‘The Presence,’ which is taken from his 1981 collection, *Between Here and Now*.

‘Sea-watching’ describes him turning out toward the sea. ‘The Presence’ counterbalances this by describing a turn inward towards dark contemplation and silence. In keeping with Underhill’s classification of the mystic’s stages of development, ‘The Presence’ describes the transformation from stage three to stage four in which illumination leads to contemplation, and contemplation leads to a painful recognition of the absence of the divine, and the necessary surrendering of his self, and the enriching poverty that accompanies such a relinquishment.

‘The Presence’ describes the intimate process of self-simplification. Sea-watching describes the necessity of undergoing a physical poverty in order to enrich and cleanse the senses; here, the mystic undergoes an inward poverty in order to enrich his spiritual sight. Here he portrays the world of a contemplative which is described by Underhill as ‘The Prayer of Quiet,’ or ‘The Interior Silence.’

the contemplative glides, almost insensibly, on to a
plane of perception for which human speech has few
equivalents. It is a plane which is apparently

¹¹⁹ Tennyson, ‘The Two Voices,’ quoted in William James, *The Varieties Of Religious Experience*, ed. Martin E. Marty, Penguin Classics, p. 383.

¹²⁰ Shelley, ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,’ in *The Selected Poetry and Prose*, Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2002, p. 129.

characterized by an immense increase in the receptivity of the self, and by an almost complete suspension of the reflective powers. The strange silence which is the outstanding quality of this state—almost the only note in regard to it which the surface-intelligence can secure—is not describable. Here the self passes beyond the stage at which its perceptions are capable of being dealt with by thought. It can no longer ‘take notes,’ can only surrender itself to the stream of an inflowing life and the direction of a larger will.¹²¹

In the state of contemplation, the subject becomes receptive to a presence that engages with him on a level below surface-intelligence and the outcome of this engagement is the gained knowledge that he must surrender his will to the presence, devote his whole being to a presence that has no name, no definable traits of humanity and inhumanity.

I pray and incur
silence. Some take that silence
for refusal.

I feel the power
that, invisible, catches me
by the sleeve, nudging
towards the long shelf
that has the book on it I will take down
and read and find the antidote
to an ailment.

I know its ways with me;
how it enters my life,
is presence rather
before I perceive it, sunlight quivering
on a bare wall.

Is it consciousness trying
to get through?
Am I under
regard?

It takes me seconds
to focus, by which time
it has shifted its gaze,
looking a little to one
side, as though I were not here.

It has the universe
to be abroad in.

¹²¹ Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 350.

There is nothing I can do
but fill myself with my own
 silence, hoping it will approach
 like a wild creature to drink
there, or perhaps like Narcissus
to linger a moment over its transparent face.¹²²

Prayer and silence are techniques of communion used here to evoke a power, a presence, from out of the universe and into intimate contact with him. 'Incur' comes from the Latin *incurrere*, meaning to *run toward*. Silence comes running, followed by the 'presence.' The presence is a creature of silence that holds silent communion with him on an unconscious level, prior to the vandalism of self-consciousness. It is present before he perceives it, before his own eyes dislocate it from its orientation toward him.

Silence is the language of the sacral, Hierophantic Self, the sound of wonder and awe. It is also a substance, a material. He fills himself with silence as though silence were a kind of liquid, a body of water that is deep, reflective and nourishing for the presence. To fill himself with his own silence is to clear his mind, the window of his consciousness. Cleared, emptied, purged of the dirt of the ego, consciousness becomes transparent, ready to receive the rippling touch of the divine.

Contemplation leads to simplification of the self and simplification leads to a spiritual poverty wherein desire and will are suspended and he becomes a passive being waiting to be moved into union with the divine. Silence is the receptive passivity of his being surrendered to the will of the presence. 'Self-Naughting' is the phrase mystics have assigned to the process of becoming a transparent being, emptied of oneself, ready to be filled with the light and air of God. At the close of the poem when he says there 'is nothing I can do,' he confesses the results of self-naughting which are *I am nothing, I have nothing, I desire nothing*. Through the simplification of his self into a vessel of silence, he offers himself up to the presence. All he has become is a receptacle for the presence, waiting and hoping.

¹²² R.S. Thomas, 'The Presence,' *Collected Poems, 1945-1990*, Phoenix, 1993, p. 391.

There is a kind of obscure dialogue with the presence that goes on below the subject's consciousness awareness. He says 'it is present rather before I perceive it/ sunlight quivering on a bare wall.' How, then, does he know that the presence is present if it escapes his perception? What sense does he possess that is capable of registering the presence of a presence that is elusive and tactful, with a range of movement that extends from ultimate intimacy to the immensity of the universe? Silence becomes a sense within which he operates and the presence operates. By filling himself with his own silence, he fills himself up with a sensing language that engages in a dialogue with an incorporeal spirit. Silence is able to draw the presence out from the corners of the universe towards his self. In the poem, silence becomes a perceptive faculty that can engage in a reciprocal, pre-rational communion with a presence across infinite distances. By becoming a creature of silence, he becomes more concretely the Hierophantic Self toward which his spiritual journey has been evolving. He has returned to a sacred world grounded in silence.

Made spiritually rich by the immolation of his desire and will, Thomas is now prepared for his life to be harmonised with nature and thereby, God. Through contemplation and surrender, he fulfils Meister Eckhart's command when he says:

A man must become truly poor and as free from his own creaturely will as he was when he was born. And I tell you, by the eternal truth, that so long as you *desire* to fulfil the will of God and have any hankering after eternity and God, for just so long you are not truly poor. He alone has true spiritual poverty who wills nothing, knows nothing, desires nothing.¹²³

The more of himself he dedicates to the silent awaiting of the presence, the less he is of his own personal self. Eroding away his own personal desires and will is a fundamental part of the mystic's receptivity of the divine presence. God will only go to him if he is not there. For the nature-mystic, immolation of individuating consciousness, the ego, is achieved by immersion in nature and focusing his mind on God. For the pure mystic, immolation of the personal self is achieved by giving oneself to God alone. Nature is regarded as a distraction in the case of the pure-mystic. For the nature-mystic, nature is the royal road.

¹²³ Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, trans. Oliver Davies, Penguin Classics, 1994, p. 236.

VI

Stillness, quiet and waiting are necessary rituals that the mystic performs to fulfil his or her destiny as a pilgrim of God. The poem's 'Sea-watching' and 'The Presence' report the diminishment of individuated consciousness and the augmentation of a life dedicated to a spiritual rapport with the natural world and, therefore, God, in the hope of, if only fleeting, a rapturous embrace. Stillness, quiet and waiting are the characteristic traits of the Hierophantic Self becoming aware of its inclusion in a world in which its inherent sacredness is becoming more strongly apparent. They are traits of one who is waking up from the slumber of individuated consciousness, merging into the immense conscious that pressed down upon him at Abersoch.

And finally, he is answered. The 'meaning that is in the waiting' is confirmed, rewarded in 'The Other' :

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
to the swell born somewhere in the Atlantic
rising and falling, rising and falling
wave on wave on the long shore
by the village, that is without light
and companionless. And the thought comes
of that other being who is awake, too,
letting our prayers break on him,
not like this for a few hours,
but for days, years, for eternity.

Humanity eternally participates in prayer that flows out toward the shores of God who is the band of light surrounding the earth. Thus prayer becomes the fundamental mode of human ontology and is expressed in terms of aspiration, devotion, out-pouring and ecstasy.

Richard Jefferies, in his autobiography *The Story of My Heart* rapt in communion with the hierophany of the sea said:

By prayer I do not mean request for anything
proffered to a deity; I mean intense soul-emotion,
intense aspiration...¹²⁴

The behaviour that characterises the Hierophantic Self is prayer roused into active devotion by the call of the sea which puts him in touch with God. He has merged into a universal 'I' that is the oneness of God, Nature and Humanity. God, Nature and Humanity each have a participatory role to play in the orchestra of the Union. Humanity participates in this union by means of prayer, by 'intense aspiration' of oneness.

Also, the religious framework that the small poem constructs is that Nature is in God, rather than God is in Nature. This is the Panentheistic vision. The 'thought that comes of that other being' arrives *along* with the swell that is, like the thought itself, born somewhere in the Atlantic. Mind and Sea are one, both incorporeally and intercorporeally. The Atlantic swell and the response of consciousness have their origin from the same fecund, mysterious origin, the 'divine fecundity.'

Peaceful equanimity between consciousness and the ocean has been achieved by Thomas due to his unremitting devotion to the life of the sea. United in this way, the synthesis is the intimation of God. The sea is sacramental. By listening to the sea, he hears the sounds of humanity opening out and breaking at the feet of God just as Wordsworth in Tintern Abbey could hear the still, sad music of humanity in the Wye Valley.

Amidst all the loud, alert activity of the fox and owl, he too, is alert and passive in a kind of enlivened insomnia, awake with God in the darkness, the 'good dark' that mystics spoke of. Consciousness is immersed in the sea that as sacrament partakes in a unified life directed toward God. This is not the thought of a discursive intellect in opposition to the mystery of the world. The 'thought that comes,' bourn along as one of Atlantic waves, is the thought that wells up from within on its own accord in perfect rhythm with the movements of the sea, which brings with it feelings of identification with the natural world, the rest of humanity, and God. The thought

¹²⁴ *The Story of My Heart*, p. 123.

that comes, comes from the One Mind of humanity that operates in terms of prayer. The Hierophantic Self that Thomas has become, has grown into, thinks and perceives in terms of prayer. Through the window of the Hierophantic Self he sees into the rest of the heart of the humanity. He has plugged into some deep origin of Being that functions by prayer that all of humanity has in common. Sea, Man, Thought, come from the same source. Turned towards God in this manner, sea, man, and thought become sacred and interrelated.

Awareness of God comes from being at peace with the natural world. And God is both immanent and transcendent to the natural world, centre and circumference. Only through a union with nature is the nature-mystic led into an intimate, dynamic awareness of the eternal presence of God. This peace is echoed in my own poem, 'Keyhaven Marshes,' in which the presence of God ratifies the discovery of the Hierophantic Self brought about by an awakening, through the bodily senses, to the beckoning call of the sacredness of nature of which the Hierophantic Self is a part:

Keyhaven Marshes

No wind, but a power wide and strong flows
 from the glowing horizon across Keyhaven
 Marshes. Sky-ship V's of geese blow apart,
 lagoon waves rise and roll spluttering along
 the cement sea-wall, turnstones crouch in
 their tiny feed dens, the cross-shaped mud-
 flat danger-sign groans, and the daylight is
 clearly rushed to brighten by shocks of air.
 Blasted characters with hawk-quick looks
 hold fast in a world almost torn to shades
 and ashen pieces. Egrets, herons, deftly fight
 for their stillness as I emerge from behind
 candle crowned gorse, lit and hit once firmly,
 right here, by a sure winged hand of calm.

Coming back to R. S. Thomas, the Hierophantic Self is first all discovered in its embryonic form, a seed, prompted by the nature-mystic's desire to be at one with Creation that rouses the nature-mystic's spiritual desire into action. By entering onto the nature-mystic's way, the seed, through contact with the nourishment vitalities of the natural world and cleansed of weeds and confusion by the sword of inward

another with roots of light and flesh that reach down deep into the earth, flower up towards the sky and sun, and breath in the salt-air of the sea.

Chapter Three

**The Lamp and the Sheepfold:
A Heideggerian account of ‘Michael.’**

The sheepfold is falling away.
It is built nearly in the form of a heart
unequally divided.

- Dorothy Wordsworth,

*Extracts from The Journal of Dorothy Wordsworth*¹²⁶

Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.

- Martin Heidegger,

*‘Building Dwelling Thinking’*¹²⁷

Say that the things are structures, frameworks, the stars of
our life: not before us, laid out as perspective spectacles, but
gravitating about us.

- Merleau-Ponty,

*‘The Visible and the Invisible’*¹²⁸

In this chapter I am going to look at the significance of ‘place’ in Wordsworth’s poem, ‘Michael.’ The sacredness that is born of the body’s immersion in the natural world emerges in *places*. Place is the primary context in which the birth of sacredness, conceived by the interpenetration of the body and the natural world, is given room to occur.

¹²⁶ Dorothy and William Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere, extracts from the Journal of Dorothy Wordsworth and from the poems of William Wordsworth*, ed. Collette Clark, Penguin Books, 1986, p. 81.

¹²⁷ From ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, HarperCollins Publishers, 1971, p.158.

¹²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern University, 1968. p. 220.

However, because the concept of place itself is such a broad and much discussed theme in the topographical poetry of Wordsworth I am going to focus specifically on two themes that fall under the heading of a general, topographical inquiry - these themes are 'dwelling' and 'things.' I am going to look at the relationship between one dwelling: the sheepfold, and one thing: the lamp, and show how the sheepfold and the lamp are connected to each other and why their connection as a dwelling and a thing relate to place as such.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger and the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard have been indispensable in their manner of probing deeply into what it means to be in place, to dwell, and to live alongside things. Any topographical inquiry into the meaning of place and place-related themes cannot be advanced without recourse to the two aforementioned thinkers. My approach to 'Michael' will be philosophical, rather than purely literary or geographical or even anthropological. The reason for this is not only that I'm interested in the way philosophy and poetry can be brought into dialogue, but in the case of 'Michael,' it seems especially fitting to adapt philosophies to the poem which concern themselves with questions of place.

Place, as a general theme of inquiry, brings the poetry of Wordsworth and the philosophies of Bachelard and Heidegger into dialogue. The philosophies of Bachelard and Heidegger are, for the most part, topographical. And Wordsworth, as Jonathan Bate says, 'remains the founding father for a thinking of poetry in relation to place, to our dwelling upon the earth,'¹²⁹ in the history of poetry. I would also say that Heidegger, in particular the Heidegger post *Being and Time*, and Bachelard, are themselves, in a way, the founding fathers for a thinking of philosophy in relation to place and what it means to be in and out of place.

Prior to the work of Heidegger and Bachelard, the theme of place remained curiously silent in philosophy, and not only in philosophy but in the natural sciences as well. In his introduction to *Getting Back Into Place*, Edward S. Casey states that:

No one doubts that place is indispensable to daily living. After all, it is the concrete basis of location, inhabitation, and orientation on the part of human beings and other animals. But philosophers have acted as if they did not know this – as if place were a mere annex of space or something subordinate to time and history. Though sometimes touching on aspects of place,

¹²⁹ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, Picador, 2000, p. 205.

philosophers have not acknowledged its full scope and more complete significance.¹³⁰

Considering the notion that a sense of place is absolutely integral to an understanding of ourselves and our relation to the earth, the absence of place in philosophy shows a blind-spot in the traditions of philosophical inquiry.

Abandoned in order to prioritise their investigations into space, consciousness, history and time, place, for the most part, was deemed only a marginal, ancillary phenomenon in the philosophic enterprise. Place had no lasting place in philosophy prior to Heidegger and Bachelard, just as place had no real and lasting place in poetry prior to Wordsworth. Although this is quite a wild generalisation, there is very little evidence to support the notion that place was inquired into as deeply as Bachelard and Heidegger, and also as deeply as Wordsworth. Of course, places have been written about and places spark the occasion to write about places, but place as the primal way in which beings *first of all* engage with the world and are engaged by the world hasn't been devoted in the ways, say, ideas of consciousness, space and time have been devoted to. All three writers on place radically shift our attention away from such themes as space and time, and show that *where we are* is the primary enigma, where the unfolding of lives begin. Coming from divergent angles of inquiry, Wordsworth, Bachelard and Heidegger, poetry and philosophy, are the originators of the resurgence of place as a topic worth investigating in its own right. The resurgence of place in itself as a topic replete with fundamental meaning becomes their common ground.

These few preliminary remarks have hopefully shown that place as a topic is worth a more full consideration, and has been unfairly neglected in the past and only now, in the midst of frantic modernity has place undergone a resurgence across diverse fields of intellectual inquiry. The relevance of Wordsworth's poetry is that it can act as a guiding light toward our place in a seemingly placeless world, or more precisely, a world defined by continual displacement despite the fact of an ever increasing pressure toward integration which, sadly, means the loss of diversity. And I hope to show in this chapter a little, if only inconsequential, glimpse of that light.

¹³⁰ Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back Into Place, Toward A Renewed Understanding Of The Place-World*, Indiana University Press, 2009, p. xxxi.

I

In her journal Dorothy Wordsworth indicates that William worked hard at getting ‘Michael’ written over a period of two months dating from Saturday, October 11th 1800 to Tuesday, December 9th 1800. William is described as making frequent walks out to the sheepfold to compose during morning and evenings, working there through the changes of autumn into winter when snow would blow like smoke from the tops of Helvellyn and over Easedale. He toiled hard in getting the poem right and he often made himself ill in the process and he would often return home from the sheepfold unsuccessful in composition, as Dorothy indicates in her diary on many occasions. We could say that the story of ‘Michael’ obsessed him. Juliet Barker in her *Wordsworth: A Life* notes the immediate attraction that the sheepfold pressed upon him:

A few days after he returned to Keswick, William and Dorothy took what they call a walk, but ordinary mortals would call a scramble, up Greenhead Ghyll, a precipitous path alongside a mountain stream which tumbles down a cleft between the swelling breast of Stone Arthur and Heron Pike. Their object was to visit a ruined sheepfold which, they had learned from their neighbours the Fishers, had been built by a previous occupant of their own cottage. Whether it was the evocative shape of the sheepfold, ‘in the form of a heart unequally divided,’ John Fisher’s lamentations about the fate of the statesman (the local name for the Lakeland freeholder farmer), who was fast becoming an endangered species, or, more likely, a combination of both, William was instantly inspired.¹³¹

After two months of seasonal toil in rain, sun and winter winds, he completed the poem and in ‘Michael,’ he had created a man ‘of strong mind and lively sensibility, agitated by two of the most powerful affections of the human heart; the parental affection, and the love of property, landed property, including the feelings of inheritance, home, and personal and family independence.’ His devotional and determined visits to the sheepfold, immersing himself in the atmosphere, weathers, landscape and moods of Greenhead Ghyll also show that the place itself, where the sheepfold was situated, was of primary importance in the creation of ‘Michael.’ *Where*

¹³¹ Juliet Barker, *Wordsworth: A Life*, Penguin Books, 2001, p.194.

Michael lived is equally significant to *what* Michael lived for and the principles by which Wordsworth perceived him to live by. The poem is as much a celebration of the place itself as it is of the Michael the character. Michael cannot be torn away from the place in which he was at home.

I am first of all going to focus on the things of the place(s) within which Michael dwelt. The first, most prominent thing of the place(s) where Michael lived is the lamp that hung within the cottage that gave the cottage its appellation, the ‘Evening Star.’

Down from the ceiling, by the chimney’s edge,
That in our ancient uncouth country style
With huge and black projection overbrowed
Large space beneath, as duly as the light
Of day grew dim the Housewife hung a lamp;
An aged utensil, which had performed
Service beyond all others of its kind.
Early at evening did it burn – and late,
Surviving comrade of uncounted hours,
Which, going by from year to year, had found,
And left, the couple neither gay perhaps
Nor cheerful, yet with objects and with hopes,
Living a life of eager industry.
And now when Luke had reached his eighteenth year,
There by the light of this old lamp they sate,
Father and Son, while far into the night
The Housewife plied her own peculiar work,
Making the cottage through the silent hours
Murmur as with the sound of summer flies.
Not with a waste of words, but for the sake
Of pleasure, which I know that I shall give
To many living now, I of this Lamp
Speak thus minutely: for there are few
Whose memories bear witness to my tale.
This light was famous in its neighbourhood,
And was a public symbol of the life
That thrifty Pair had lived. For, as it chanced,
Their cottage on a plot of rising ground
Stood single, with large prospects, north and south,
High into Easedale, up the Dunmail-Raise,
And westward to the village near the lake;
And from this constant light, so regular
And so far seen, the House itself, by all
Who dwelt within the limits of the vale,

Both old and young, was named The Evening Star.¹³²

Should the reader, in his mind's eye, see the lamp as Gerard Manley Hopkins saw a late candle burning in the window of a house at night?

Some candle clear burns somewhere I come by.
I muse at how its being puts blissful back
With yellowy moisture mild night's blear-all black,
Or to-fro tender trambeams truckle at the eye.
By that window what task fingers ply,
I plod wondering...¹³³

The sight of a candle or a lamp burning and beaming softly in a home at night awakens wonder and draws the looker-on into the indoor world of the home that the lamp or candle shines for. Awakening wonder, the light stops the looker-on in his tracks. It is as fascinating as looking at a star. The eye of the mind and body widens, expands to take the little light in. What is this light, this trembling incandescence that attracts our gaze? It is a thing, not a mere lamp. But what is a thing? To this question I will return after the world of lamp is evoked.

The lamp, the only thing seen of the house in the darkness of night, in effect, brought the stars down to earth amongst the hills surrounding Greenhead Ghyll. The lamp furnished the house with an intimate cosmicity that must have been a great source of comfort to Michael as he roamed the hills through dusk and into the night. The lamp puts the house amidst the constellation of remoter stars, bringing near the heavens to earth, impregnating the local earth with universal wonder.

Not only from outside did the house become a guiding star. Inside the home it provided light for the family work shared out between mother, father and son. The range of the lamp's virtuous influence is from the intimacy of family and home, to the surrounding vale and the people that dwelt in the vale, and into the universe and the starry constellations. 'An aged utensil,' the lamp is an ancient centre of belonging that, through its constant shining, makes of the universe itself a home. The lamp brings the heavens and earth together in the form of a small light that shines out across the vale.

¹³² 'Michael: A Pastoral Poem' by William Wordsworth in Wordsworth & Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*. ed R.L.Brett and A.R.Jones, London and New York Routledge, 1993. p. 230, lines 112-146.

¹³³ 'The Candle Indoors,' quoted from the section 'Home,' in Andrew Motion's *Here to Eternity: An Anthology of Poetry*, Faber and Faber, 2001, p.38.

Terrestrial becomes celestial, and vice versa. Home is a star within the reach of those who dwell on earth.

The lamps of the house shining like a star in the night sky is an example of what Gaston Bachelard calls a 'primal image' which gives us back 'areas of being, houses, in which the human being's certainty of being is concentrated,'¹³⁴ and which speak profoundly of what he calls *inhabiting*.

Indeed, Bachelard, in his *The Poetics of Space*, gives the reader examples of the idea of intimate inhabitation associated with the poetic images of houses and stars that align with images of the lamp and cottage which Wordsworth describes. Bachelard calls the 'lamp in the window the house's eye,' and that 'by means of the light of the far-off house, the house sees, keeps vigil, vigilantly waits, and 'the lamp is the symbol of prolonged waiting.'¹³⁵ The lamp ensures that the house sees and is seen. Bachelard says that 'in such images we have the impression that the stars in heaven come to live on earth, that the houses of men form earthly constellations.' I have been often stirred by the image of house and star and I have tried to respond to this in my own poem, 'Another Astronomy':

Smoke from garden-fires
clouds the stars above the house.

Does home now become an instant
constellation or a preparation to be made so?
From town, brother, we have walked
an avenue of observatories
to the final one before the sea.

The father rummaging to fix a fuse,
a mother's voice is a night-light in a black-out.
Then there are those breathings
prior to what we deem as ours.

We linger in the flicker of porch-light
on the dew-decked lawn
among glistening beads of reflected fires
that burst in nervous hands
as we kneel to make stars of the ground,
trying to mimic how mum would sew.

Nightly you tell me the science

¹³⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, pp.5-8.

¹³⁵ Bachelard. p. 34.

of how bricks can bruise inward at dusk
 then you drink the water from my bedside table
 so I go thirsty through my dreams.

Home and the heavens are strangely cohesive. The darkness and light within the home can seem as dark and as light as the starry skies, and as mysterious and deep. The darkness of a corridor can seem as dark and deep as staring into the night-sky. At night in the home the ceiling can appear as infinitely high as the night sky itself. In ‘Michael’ the star that the lamp makes of Michael’s home is not any star, but ‘The Evening Star.’ Sappho, in fragment 104 (a), celebrates the function of the Evening Star as follows:

O Evening Star, bringing everything
 that dawn’s first glimmer scattered far and wide –
 you bring the sheep, you bring the goat,
 you bring the child back to the Mother.¹³⁶

Not only is the function of the lamp in the window one of prolonged waiting as Bachelard says, but here is poetic evidence enough to suggest that the function of the lamp is one of constant bringing, gathering. The lamp that causes the house to be named the Evening Star is a light that goes out to bring and gather. Through the lamp-as-star, home is given a large sphere of benevolent influence.

A light that actively gathers brings this assessment of ‘Michael’ out of images and into the world of things. Gathering, as I shall discuss in due course, is the hallmark mode of the being of a thing. This is where I will move from Bachelard to Heidegger. I want to bring this discussion of ‘Michael’ out of the realm of images and into the world of things. In order to understand the meaning of dwelling in ‘Michael’ it is not conducive to confine this account to images alone. It is the lamp itself as a *thing* that I am interested in here, not merely with the poetic image of the lamp. The poetic image of the lamp, the ‘primal images’ that ‘bring back areas of being’ which stir human consciousness into place and foster reveries of intimacy can also inspire human consciousness to return to the world that is revered, that is dreamed about - the world of things. If Bachelard talks about primal images that bring back areas of being and

¹³⁶ *The Complete Poems of Sappho*, trans. Willis Barnstone, Shambala Publications, 2009, p. 17.

belonging, Heidegger talks about primal *things* that bring back areas of being and the sense of belonging to a world.

II

The lamp is a thing. But what, Heidegger asks, is a thing? From the descriptions in the poem, the lamp performs specific, practical functions. But these functions, providing light for work, to eat meals by, etc, transfigures onto a plane in which the lamp goes beyond mere throwaway utility. An ‘aged utensil’ indeed, but a utensil that becomes an unforgettable part of the locality in which the starry lamp is embedded. The lamp and the locality become inextricably interrelated. To throw away the lamp would be to throw away a part of the locality itself, and thereby diminish the place, put out the light of place as such. But how is this so? How is it that a mere lamp, a thing, can give rise to a sense of place where people dwell and where the seasons alter the face of the land? To this question I will return in due course.

The lamp becomes irreplaceably a part of the family’s day-to-day strife and a part of the landscape in which the family and home is emplaced. The lamp is a thing and through it a whole world of family, place, home is conjured and concentrated in a single, benevolent blaze. The lamp, in the ‘limits of the vale,’ becomes a legendary and ancestral light that binds so many other things together and speaks of the life of Michael and his family. Also, the lamp is a man-made utensil that shifts into a natural thing - a star - without betraying its original, primary functions as a source of domestic light. It shines with the light of atonement between man and natural world.

From this description it can be shown that as a thing the lamp brings so many worlds into convergence: family, place, home and landscape. It is an indispensable coherer of unity. It also speaks of the one who tends this lamp, the Housewife, the Mother who is overshadowed by Michael who is usually interpreted as the chief character in the poem. It is she, the reader learns, that first hung the lamp on the huge chimney, keeping its light trimmed, suited to whatever work or play is going on in the house. We can imagine the lamp being tweaked to its highest blaze when Michael and Luke are out on the hills so that the light shines out stronger and further. The light of the lamp is the heart of intimate belonging that governs the range of intimacy between father, mother, son, home, and the surrounding landscapes. Their lives revolve around the light.

In his *The Pathway*, Martin Heidegger says that as a child when he sailed, with his friends, their little wooden boats across the Metten Brook and in the school fountain, ‘the eyes and hands of the mother surrounded their world. It was as if her unspoken care protected all that came to be.’¹³⁷ Applying these sentiments to ‘Michael,’ the lamp speaks of the mother who cares through the lamp, the life of her home and family, a light that glows within the house and in the sky. The lamp is the light of *care* that is the life of the mother and care, according to Heidegger, is the primary mode of *Dasein*, of our being-there in the world. The lamp is a thing that shines with the light of care. This is the life of the lamp-as-thing but such a description needs to be grounded and clarified in a more concrete philosophy. Already before Heidegger began to delve more deeply into the nature of things, dwelling, and care, he described, in *Being and Time*, care as being ‘pre-ontological,’ meaning that care already shapes our involvement in the world before we shape our world. Care is the primordial way in which beings are in the world. I will come back to the notion of care in terms of how mortals dwell and experience things.

Returning to the original question, what is a thing? Martin Heidegger’s most explicit examination of the thing and thingness is his paper, ‘The Thing,’ which was first delivered as a lecture on June 6, 1950.

In it he first calls attention to the way in which nearness, the experience of nearness, has been demolished in the modern day’s present dominance of the distanceless – a homogenous uniformity of distance brought about by the mania of modern technologies and the representative kind of thinking inherited from a long line of Western thought - initiated, as I showed in chapter one, by Descartes, - that is now indicative of modern man’s destructive grip upon the world. Nearness, true intimacy with each other and the natural world, has been eclipsed by the false proximities that our technologies promote. For example, the rave of facebook brings us, truly, no nearer to each other. It promotes false interaction that we believe to be true. Television captures the natural world into images and film that make the viewer believe he were actually closer to her, - and yet the destruction of nature prevails, no true intimacy has been revived. A passage from Rilke in a letter from November 13, 1925, comes to mind:

¹³⁷ Martin Heidegger, *The Pathway*, trans. Thomas F. O’ Meara, Stanford University Press, 1968, p. 2.

To our grandparents, a 'house,' a 'well,' a familiar steeple, even their own clothes, their cloak *still* meant infinitely more, were infinitely more intimate – almost everything a vessel in which they found something human already there, and added to its human store. Now there are intruding, from America, empty indifferent things, sham things, *dummies of life*... A house, as the American understand it, an American apple or a winestock from over there, have *nothing* in common with the house, the fruit, the grape into which the hope and thoughtfulness of our forefathers hand entered...¹³⁸

The saviour of authentic nearness and of renewing a true intimacy with the world of weighted, gravitating things can come about, Heidegger says, by attending to what is, in fact, most near to us, to what we find when we suddenly open up our eyes to the world, that is, to things. Not life seen through a microscope or categorised into datums of pure sensations, but things such as chairs, lawns, books, trees. He then goes on to inquire into the life of a specific thing that is most near to time in the course of his inquiry - a jug. He does not wish to break the jug down into quantitative measurements, weigh the clay, assess its anatomical composition, and objectify its properties. No, he wishes to take the jug as it stands, as it is, the particular jug that is beside him.

For Heidegger, the thing-character of the thing, the jug, does not reside in it being an object which, as expressed in the German word for object, is '*Gegestand*' and the way in which the object stands opposite, '*steht gegenuber*.' Construing the jug as an object stems from taking stock of things as pieces of equipment, as things of practical purpose and utility, - their *teleology*. Although Heidegger does not go into great depth about the nature of equipment in 'The Thing,' it is implied, and refers back to Heidegger's earlier study of equipment and equipmentality in sections of *Being and Time*. It is important, therefore, that the nature of equipment gets clarified because it is fundamental to the understanding of the thing.

The lamp in 'Michael' just as the jug in 'The Thing' are pieces of equipment designed to perform specific functions. Designed as a means to an end - the lamp provides light in the night, the jug holds liquid and, on demand, can, by the human movement of the grasping human hand, pour out liquid for human consumption. At its most rudimentary level, its teleological level, both lamp and jug serve human ends.

¹³⁸ Quoted in Martin Heidegger, 'What Are Poets For?' in *Poetry, Language, Thoughts*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, HarperCollins, 2001, p.110.

Man is master over them. In this way, things are not, as Merleau-Ponty puts in the introductory quotes, ‘stars of our life,’ they are glorified rubbish. And if the lamp’s light dies out or the jug breaks, their reliability becomes an issue, and probably a fleeting issue at that if they can be swiftly replaced. Lamp and Jug, in this sense, are commodities in the trafficking of human usage. Things are laid out before him in a spectacle of ready usage, subdued to a task that a human being wishes to carry out. In *Being and Time* Heidegger gives the example of a hammer and how, as a tool, it becomes situated not in the existential, primordial space of *Dasein*’s being-in-the-world but in the objective space of representation in which the world of things is laid out before us as on a table. Jeff Malpas in his *Heidegger’s Topology: Being, Place, World* says that:

Heidegger presents objective space, and so the space of measurement, as coming into view through the breakdown in being-there’s active engagement with its world that ‘releases’ items of equipment from their equipmental context, allowing them to appear as detached ‘objects’ within an objective space. When we grasp an item of equipment as merely an object, possessed of certain abstract properties, we grasp it as merely ‘present-at-hand,’ stripped of its readiness-to-use, appearing within a ‘leveled’ – out homogenous space.¹³⁹

What is crucially at stake in the passing over of *Dasein*’s lived engagement with the world and the subsequent re-invention of an abstract world is the snuffing out of the potency of place. In *Being and Time* he says that:

In the ‘physical’ assertion that ‘the hammer is heavy’ we *overlook* not only the tool- character of the entity we encounter, but also something that belongs to any ready-to-hand equipment: its place. Its place becomes a matter of indifference. This does not mean that what is present-at-hand loses its ‘location’ altogether. But its place becomes a ‘spatio-temporal’ position, a ‘world-point,’ which is in no-way distinguished from any other.¹⁴⁰

Grasping the hammer, the lamp or the jug as just and only just a piece of equipment means to overlook not only the place within which the hammer, lamp or

¹³⁹ Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger’s Topology: Being, Place, World*, MIT Press Books, 2006, p. 117.

¹⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, Blackwell Publishing, 1962, p. 102.

jug is situated but in a more fundamental way the place(s) that are revealed through the thing itself. But the place that is opened up through the thing as something more than mere equipment is not the location in which the things resides, i.e. the workbench, the chimney, the kitchen table, it is the very happening of place itself. The difference between a thing-as-thing and thing-as-equipment rests upon the efficacy in which place is born. Again, to quote Jeff Malpas who is the leading thinker on place in Heidegger's philosophy:

The idea of place that invoked here is not, it should be stressed, the idea of that in which entities are merely 'located'; rather, in the terms I used immediately above, place is that open, cleared, yet bounded region in which we find ourselves gathered together with other persons and things, and which we are opened up to the world and world to us. It is out of this place that space and time both emerge, and yet the place at issue here also has a dynamic character of its own – it is not merely the static appearance of a viewed locale or landscape, but is rather a unifying, gathered *regioning* – place is, in this sense, always a 'taking place,' a 'happening' of place.¹⁴¹

Equipment deadens the possible upsurge of place into a flat uniformity that deflates into a mere backdrop against which the piece of equipment sits, detachable and ready-for-use. It does not permit place to take place, to happen. A thing, more primordial than mere equipment, allows place to swell and surge forth. Thinging is the happening of place, the grounded locality from which we are given over to possible experiences. Again, Malpas says:

To begin with, the thing is not simply *at* a location in the way that the tool appears to be. Indeed, the 'thinging' of the thing is also a certain happening of place out of which the very possibility of location can then arise. To think of the thing as itself having a certain location presupposes that one has already stepped back from the thing as 'thinging,' so as gathering a world, in order to view it simply as one 'thing' located with respect to other similarly located 'thing' within a larger order of such locations.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Malpas. p. 110.

¹⁴² Malpas, p. 253.

Not to step back from the thinging of the thing into our withdrawn world of abstraction but to step forward into the light of the thing itself requires a renewed commitment to the life of things and not to our own ideas of the life of things. The place within which we already find ourselves before we have withdrawn from it is the place that comes into being through the thinging of the thing. Through the shining of the lamp, the outpouring of the jug, the place within which everything that *is* belongs and is opened up. Such a mode of experiencing the world in this way is entirely alien and remote to a species for whom everything is judged by its equipmental utility. In this way, Heidegger's thinking is difficult and quite alien to our customary ways of thinking.

This is not to say that equipmentality and usage are, in themselves, denigrating. It is the way that humanity organises this world that is denigrating. Lamp and jug have to be of use, they are, there is no doubt, pieces of equipment. But Heidegger says, there is something much deeper, more primordial that is going on here, and is forgotten in humanity's take on the world of things.

The jug in this case, does not stand opposite in its over-againstness as an object or wholly a piece of equipment, although it does perform specific functions which define its equipmentality. This thing, rather, 'stands forth' (*steht vor*). A thing which stands forth, rather than an object which stands over-against us, possesses two fundamental characteristics: 'First, standing forth has the sense of stemming from somewhere, whether this be a process of self-making or of being made by another. Secondly, standing forth has the sense of the made thing's standing into the unconcealedness of what is already present.'¹⁴³ A thing always stems from *somewhere* and a thing *emerges* into the world as opposed to an object which emerges out of the world. Enrootedness and a harmonious, embedded relation the world characterises the thingness of the thing.

III

Heidegger then goes on to inquire into the specific thingness of the being of the jug. The specific being of the jug is its being as a vessel and, as a vessel, it holds, keeps, contains and pours out what is held within it. Within this simple outpouring of

¹⁴³ *Building Dwelling Thinking*, p. 148.

what the vessel contains, is also, quite extravagantly and miraculously, the gathering together of earth, sky, mortals and gods. To experience the jug as a jug not as an object, image or an idea of a jug, but as a jug in itself, is to be taken into its world which gives, in its outpouring, a gathering together of earth, sky, mortals and gods:

The giving of the outpouring can be a drink. The outpouring gives water, it gives wind to drink. In the spring the rock dwells, and in the rock dwells the dark slumber of the earth, which receives the rain and dew of the sky. In the water of the spring dwells the marriage of sky and earth. It stays in the wind given by the fruit of the vine, the fruit in which the earth's nourishment and sky's sun and betrothed to one another. But the gift of the outpouring is what makes the jug a jug. In the jugness of the jug, sky and earth dwell. The gift of pouring out is a drink for mortals. It refreshes their leisure. It enlivens their conviviality. But the jug's gift is at times also given for consecration, then it does not still a thirst. It stills and elevates the celebration of the feast. The gift of the pouring now is neither given in an inn nor is the poured gift a drink for mortals. The outpouring is the libation poured out for the immortal gods...In the gift of the outpouring earth, sky, divinities and mortals dwell *together all at once*. These four, at one once because of what they themselves are, belong together. Preceding everything that is present, they are enfolded in a single fourfold.¹⁴⁴

Before going into an examination of what is going on here in terms of the fourfold earth, sky, divinities and mortals, and the way in which the jug gathers, it is relevant to go into the gathering life of the lamp that hangs on the chimney in 'Michael.' To begin, let us go back to Sappho's epigram on the Evening Star:

O Evening Star, bringing everything
that dawn's first glimmer scattered far and wide –
you bring the sheep, you bring the goat,
you bring the child back to the Mother.

In 'Michael,' the lamp is named the Evening Star because, as Sappho indicates, the Evening Star beckons sheep, goat, child and mother, together, - but where? Home. Not the actual building that is called home, but the home that is the essential belonging of all things to each other. Scattered far and wide by the discriminating light of dawn, the evening star brings them together under the unifying cloak of night that does not

¹⁴⁴ Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing,' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 170-171.

constrict but releases the return of each thing back to where they belong. In a similar way, the Lamp gathers everything together to the place within which Michael, Luke, Sheep, Home, Earth, belongs not in a stifling unity but a unity in which everything is given freedom *to be* in their own particular ways of being.

Even the way in which the lamp is made has relevance here. What type and style of lamp is it? For purposes that suit this examination of things and place, I am going to assume that the style of lamp used was the rushlight, or a collection of rushlights, which would have emitted enough of a flame to generate the light that would have looked like a flickering star in the night. Rushlights are reported to have been used by poorer people that lived in Britain's rural areas and would have had little, if any access, to the new developments in lighting in the eighteenth century. To illustrate the rushlight in greater detail, Gertrude Jekyll in her *Old West Surrey: Some Notes and Memories* says that:

In the summer, when the common rushes of marshy ground were at their full growth, they were collected by women and children. The rush is of very simple structure, white pith inside and a skin of tough green peel. The rushes were peeled, all but a narrow strip, which was left to strengthen the pith, and were hung up in bunches to dry. Fat of any kind was collected, though fat from salted meat was avoided if possible. It was melted in boat-shaped grease-pans that stood on their three short legs in the hot ashes in front of the fire. They were of cast-iron; made on purpose. The bunches, each of about a dozen peeled rushes, were drawn through the grease and then put aside to dry.¹⁴⁵

The rush is the seasonal gift of the earth that Housewife and child, Luke in the case of 'Michael,' gather and give thanks for. It is a gift of the earth and the tallow or grease-fat which makes the rush-pith burn causes the flame that lights the room in which family are gathered together at work or at play. Growing in marshy ground and rain-sodden soil, the rush needs water to grow, rain and sun that are the gifts of the sky, nourishing the seasonal growth of the rush. A gift of earth and sky, the rush brings mother and child into intimate relation, spending time together,¹⁴⁶ breaking away the stem, discovering the hidden pith. Knowledge is gained over where the most plump

¹⁴⁵ Gertrude Jekyll, *Old West Surrey*, Nabu Press, 2010, p. 46.

¹⁴⁶ For an intimate account of mother and child working together over peeling potatoes see Seamus Heaney's poem, no. 3 in 'Clearances,' p. 224 of his *New Selected Poems, 1966-1987*, Faber and Faber, 1990.

and well-burning rush-piths grow, and which tallow or grease-fat burns with the brightest, longest light. Mother and child learn of the lore of the land, and when they sit beside the light in the evening they know that, together, they have brought light into the home. The simple rush brings mother, child, work, earth, sky and home together through the little light it creates.

As a lamp – in Greek *lampein* meaning ‘to shine,’ in Old English *leohtfaet*, - ‘light vessel,’ it shines with the light of intimacy between the worlds of home and earth, an interplay of unity that is missing from engagement with mere equipment. This bringing together of diverse worlds by the thing is not incidental to either Sappho’s epigram or Wordsworth’s poem; it is the very nature of the thing. But what has the thinging of the thing got to do with what Heidegger calls the ‘fourfold’? How is it that the Jug, suddenly from being a vessel that carries and gives liquid, gathers together earth, sky, god and mortals in its simple outpouring of the liquid? I have tried to reveal a glimpse of how this happens in the description of the rushlight but it still remains for this examination to go even more profoundly into the life of the thing.

What exactly is the fourfold, earth, sky, gods and mortals and how, importantly, are they summoned through the jugness of the jug, the lampness of the lamp? Things thing by gathering together the fourfold. The lamp, as a thing, things by gathering together the fourfold through its own agency. In ‘The Thing,’ Heidegger traces back the etymological meaning of the word thing to the Old German word *dinc*, which means to gather. But, it has to be asked, what kind of gathering is this? Already to speak of things as gathering admits to endowing them with a certain kind of potency or agency which is independent of human agency.

For Heidegger, the agency of the thing, the jug, the lamp, goes beyond, or goes beneath in fact, its utilitarian functions. The pouring of the water from the jug, the lighting of the tallow of the rushlight, the lights poured forth from the lamp that brings the shepherd home, all seem to resist human agency which have continual access to the way a thing functions and what the thing is for. In this respect, the thing’s purpose, its *telos*, is only fulfilled through human agency. Things are regarded as entirely dependent on humans; thereby they lose their own their self-supporting luster and become ‘etiolated by the veil of everydayness.’¹⁴⁷ But for Heidegger, the thinging of the thing which is the way it gathers, flips the entanglement on its head. Through

¹⁴⁷ Julian Young, *Heidegger’s Later Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 64.

gathering, humans are dependent on things as a source of human's co-ordination in the world. Rather than human's situating things here and there, on the shelf, above the door, - within the primordiality of gathering, things situate humans here or over there. Human being's place in the world is granted to him through things. But where is human being's place in the world, what is the place that has been allocated for them by things, and how? Humans are gathered into the world by things alongside, not only other human beings, but earth, sky and divinities which have also been gathered together *at the same time* by things, by a particular things own way of gathering. A jug will gather in a different way than a lamp will. Diversity flourishes in the advent of the primordial gathering of things.

IV

What about human's involvement in the life of things, in the thinging of the thing? Occuring along with earth, sky, and divinities, mortal cannot be severed from the fourfold and encounter a thing in isolation. Mortals come into being along with the other three of the fourfold through the gathering potency of the thing, and the way mortals occur through the thing is by the crucial term *dwelling*. The lamp assembled on the chimney, rather than being brought into being, into presence, through the work of Housewife alone, is brought into being in the way she *dwells* alongside the earth, sky and divinities.

In *Building Dwelling Thinking*, an essay which is neighbour to 'The Thing,' first given as a lecture on August 5, 1951, Heidegger defines the fourfold as follows:

Earth is the serving bearer, blossoming and fruiting, spreading out in rock and water, rising up into plant and animal. When we say earth, we are already thinking of the other three along with it, but we give no thoughts to the simple oneness of the four.

Sky is the vaulting path of the sun, the course of the changing moon, the wandering glitter of the stars, the year's seasons and their changes, the light and dusk of day, the gloom and glow of night, the clemency and inclemency of the weather, the drifting clouds and blue depth of the ether. When we say sky, we are already thinking of the other three along with it, but we give no thought to the simple ones of the four.

The divinities are the beckoning messengers of the godhead. Out of the holy sway of the godhead, the god appears in his

presence or withdraws into his concealment. When we speak of the divinities, we are already thinking of the other three along with them, but we give no thought to the simple oneness of the four.

The mortals are human beings. They are called mortals because they can die. To die means to be capable of death *as* death. Only man dies, and indeed continually, as long as he remains on the earth, under the sky, before the divinities. When we speak of mortals, we are already thinking of the other three along with them, but we give no thought to the simple oneness of the four.¹⁴⁸

It is important here, as Julian Young indicates in his book *Heidegger's Later Philosophy*, to ask 'which earth, sky, gods and mortals?'¹⁴⁹ Heidegger argues that first and foremost the fourfold that is gathered together through the thing is the local fourfold, concretely parochial. Applied to 'Michael,' the lamp gathers together the local earth, sky, gods and mortals, - and what is local is what is near; the dwelling place, the *Heimat* (home, homeland.) The resurgence of locality through the thing saves the fourfold from becoming vague abstractions divorced from the parish of the commonplace. As Wordsworth indicates, the dwelling-place(s) in Michael are those that are first and foremost, local places and local places, for sure, are bounded places situated within the 'limits of the vale.' But it is these limits that grant the local habitations their special, parochial character. The fourfold that is released through the lamp is the fourfold that is native to the place within which the lamp belongs. The earth that is summoned into being through the invocation of the thing is the local earth of Easedale and Dunmail-Raise upon which the cottage sits. The local earth is the particular geographies of that place which define and delimit the days of Michael and his family, it is the land to which Michael and his family are most intimately betrothed, familiar and at home. With the sky that is gathered along with the local earth of Greenhead Ghyll is the sky itself and beneath which their home rests, the vaulting path of the sun, the weather and cast of stars. The mortals that are gathered together along with the local earth and sky are local mortals, those mortals that belong there. These mortals are Michael, Housewife and Luke. The gods, too, are always local gods, bringing the holy that is native to the local place, parochial messengers of divinity.

¹⁴⁸ Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking,' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 147.

¹⁴⁹ Young. p. 100.

It is through the thing the relation between mortals and place becomes mutually intertwined and the relation, first and foremost, is born locally. The local environs, the dwelling places which Michael and his family inhabit are their world and their world is the parochial fourfold gathered together through the thing, the lamp. Wordsworth's narrative evocation of local places and his compulsion to compose 'Michael' at the very scene in which the tale has its birth, i.e. the sheepfold, touched on the definitiveness of the local in man's experience of the world. Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh echoes this when he says that:

To know fully even one field or one land is a lifetime's experience. In the world of poetic experience it is depth that counts, not width. A gap in a hedge, a smooth rock surfacing a narrow lane, a view of a woody meadow, the stream at the junction of four small fields – these are as much as man can fully experience.¹⁵⁰

Intimate communion with the dwelling-place is the fullest expression of man's essential nature, an intimacy guided by things, letting things beckon us and not us wresting the thing around toward our own aims.

In the emergence of the fourfold through the gathering of the lamp, mortals play a unique role. This role is defined as *Care*, *Sorge*,¹⁵¹ which I touched on earlier, in Heidegger's later philosophy, and is essential, the root, seed and flower in fact, of dwelling, *Bauen*.

The lamp, as Wordsworth indicates, does not just speak of the Housewife alone, it was 'a public symbol of the life the thrifty pair had lived.' The lamp spoke of the work that Michael and Housewife performed together. For Michael, his dwelling-place that is revealed to him through his caring work as a shepherd is the 'fields, these hills/ Which were his living Being, even more Than his own Blood.' For Michael, his home, his 'land of nearness,' are the fields and hills. For the Housewife her dwelling-place of care is the cottage, the shelter of the family, the 'original shell' as Bachelard terms it.

¹⁵⁰ Quoted by Robert Macfarlane in his introduction to Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, Canongate, 2011, p. xv.

¹⁵¹ For a pre-ontological account of Care before Heidegger's 'turn' towards his later thought, and his use of an intriguing Latin fable to demonstrate how Care moulds the shape of *Dasein*'s being-in-the-world, see sections VI.39-42 of *Being and Time*.

V

The thrifty life of the pair translates uniquely into Heidegger's philosophy. Thrift is work and work is given special attention by Heidegger in the way in which human beings dwell. For Heidegger, authentic work is care, and care, as the essential mode of man's being-in-the-world elucidated in Heidegger's philosophy, refers to the way in which human's dwell and the role they fulfill in dwelling.

Hopefully what will become clear is that Michael and the Housewife work and care for things in a unique and essential way. The lamp shines with a light that speaks of something much more profound in the relation between Michael as a shepherd and the Housewife as merely a Housewife. They are, as well as these, guardians of the local fourfold, guardians of home, the 'land of nearness.'

The caring work that Housewife and Michael perform is the care that constitutes the fundamental character of dwelling. They are productive without violation. The caring-work saves the Housewife and Michael from slipping into another, more detrimental mode of work which violates dwelling but which human beings suffer from an overarching propensity to perform. Their dwelling rests on the extent to which they care for things. Violation and the reduction of objects to nothing but resource brought about by standing opposite to the world through *techne*, drastically mitigates human beings attainment of dwelling, and dwelling is the essential feature of human being. In a dense and rich passage Heidegger says 'To be a human being means...to dwell,' and to dwell is:

to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace. The word for peace, *Friede*, means the free, *das Frye* [in old German], and *fry* mean: preserved from harm and danger, preserved from something, that is, taken-care-of [*geschont*]. To free really means to care-for [*schonen*]. The caring-for itself consists not only in the fact that we do no harm to that which is cared-for. Real caring-is something *positive* and happens when we leave something beforehand in its nature [*Wesen*], [or] when we gather [*Bergen*] something back into its nature, when we 'free' it in the real sense of the word into a preserves of peace. To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free sphere that cares-for each thing in its own nature. *The fundamental character of dwelling is this caring-for.*¹⁵²

¹⁵² Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking,' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 149.

As dwelling is a looking-after things so through dwelling is the local fourfold preserved that gets gathered together through the thing. The local earth, sky, gods and mortals are preserved in so far as mortals care for things, care for things in a way that lets them shine out in their own nature. Michael and his wife care for things in the way that is proper to dwelling. The local earth of Greenhead Ghyll and Easedale are not, though their work violated to perform functions which threaten to uproot them from their home. The land around them is not challenged, flogged to perform according to the proportions of its productivity. The land still retains its own, unique life whether or not it yields itself to resource. They work in such a way does not do violence upon there land of nearness, their home. Work-as-care ensures there is always a dwelling-place, a shelter of intimacy and intimate, authentic belonging.

If the lamp is the iridescent light of care that allows things to shine out with their own nature, their own essence, then dwelling in the light of care, in the light of the lamp is to dwell in a certain place in which each thing is given room to shine out and belong. Hence the title of my poetry collection, *Finding The Room*. Care, which allows the lamp to shine, the thing to thing and thus gather the local gods, mortals, earth and sky, together, is the way in which beings dwell. To dwell is to care which means to let a thing things, to let beings be. This then has radical repercussions in the way that built dwellings are then conceived.

Dwelling places, homes, are then built in the light of care, upon the earth that is allowed to be earth, beneath the sky that is sky and nothing else, alongside mortals and alongside the gods whose light can now penetrate into what Heidegger calls the 'Open,' or 'Clearing,' where all things belong together in their own way. What would such a building look like if it was built upon these foundations of intimate union and freedom of the fourfold, what type of building would it be? It would be a building that does not infringe upon the essential revelations of each thing's own most mode of being. The earth would stand forth as the bearing and blossoming ground, the deep blue arc of the sky, the weather, and the nights of storm and star, will also, along with the mortals who now can witness the arrival of the divinities, be freed from the constraints of oppositional thinking, and beings will be let be. The building that I speak of is the sheepfold. It is the shrine of dwelling; the shrine of intimate belonging in a world that is released from the grip of humanity, a world in which the inhuman wonder of things can now, freed from the darkness of the myopic no-more-than-human-world, shine out, or 'ring out' to use Heidegger's terminology.

The sheepfold, (which receives great descriptive treatment by Wordsworth,) that Michael builds beside Greenhead Ghyll is not just a mere arranged collection of stones taken from the bed of the stream and built to hoard sheep for gathering, counting and shearing. Like the lamp, it is designed to perform agricultural functions, but is also built upon the primordial design written by *Being*, the design of intimate belonging. It is also built as anchor, a bond between Father and Son, a sheltering protector of intimacy built in the light of care.

As a building, and also as a thing of many other things, it shows, even the lamp, cannot, by virtue being a thing be construed in isolation. A thing, the lamp, is always *for* and *of* other things. The sheepfold is not an isolate dwelling but it speaks of the landscape, of the brook, and the lives that went on there. The story speaks directly of dwelling alongside things in a particular place where a place happens. An emplacement of possible place happens.

In terms of Heidegger's philosophy, the sheepfold as a built dwelling but also a thing relates to his example of the bridge in *Building Dwelling Thinking*. Here the relation between thing and place is merged into one another so that things become places themselves where the gathering of the fourfold occurs. Place itself, the places in which things belong, happens through the thing. He says that 'Thus the bridge does not first come to a location to stand in it; rather, a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge.'¹⁵³ Like the bridge that allows the stream to run its course, for the earth to show up as the bearer of the bridge and of the mortals who walk across the bridge, beneath the untainted sky, the sheepfold is what Heidegger in the same essay called a 'genuine building,' a building which mortals build through care, allowing earth to be earth, sky to be sky, and to make a holy space for the arrival of the numinous.

The sheepfold is a genuine building, albeit an incomplete one. It was a telling shame for Michael to build it so late in his life, too old to complete it on his own which shows that Michael, separated from his son, suffers the neglect of another mortal who has forgotten the world of genuine belonging and sought out what Rilke called '*the dummies of life*,' created by the mass-industrial world of *techne*. The sense of dwelling is left to die.

¹⁵³ Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking,' p. 150.

Similarly, the location in which the sheepfold is situated comes to prominence by virtue of the sheepfold. Of course, before the construction of the sheepfold, there was always a place, a brook, a hill, and a name on the map. But that isn't the point. Heidegger is trying to get us away from that type of thinking which, disengaged from the world in its prison of representative thinking, loses sight of the dynamic synergy between thing and place, a bringing to existence played out between thing and place so that they presuppose one another. The place of the sheepfold emerges through the sheepfold as though the sheepfold draws the place up into existence like a bucket from a well, or a spring from the rocks from which the river of place gushes forth. In this manner of dynamic interplay and communion between thing and place, we experience ourselves, and the world emerging into existence, coming into being.

It is symbolic therefore, that the sheepfold shares its words with the fourfold. The sheepfold folds, interlaces things and place into one another and is built with the gathering of the fourfold into mind. Things are the shepherds of the fourfold, and the function of that sheepfold echoes and reflects this.

As it has been stated previously, the role of mortals in the fourfold from which they can never be extricated but are always and ever involved in, - earth, sky, divinities, - is to care, which means to protect and nurture, to release, to set free, and not to dominate. The Housewife acted out her role by caring for the lamp, by tending to its light, by providing the light that brought shepherd home safely through the night, and also let her home shine in the sky and upon the earth, radiant with the holy. Michael acted out his role as caring for the flock, and the land, building a sheepfold that brought not only flock together, but his son, Luke. The Ghyll ran on, unimpeded, the sky was not blocked out, and he let his son be who, caught up the world of *techne* symbolised the city, forgot his bond, not only with his father, but with the earth and his home. The stranger's hand into which the land passed is the hand of modernisation.

VI

The story of Luke seduced by the city-world of *techne* serves as a never-ending reminder not only to the poets who will be Wordsworth's second self, but also to the reader who finds himself, as did Luke, amidst a world dominated by *techne*, resource, industry and production. Within the paler world of *techne* is a more primordial and compelling world than this world of resource and objects. It is a world of wonder and

belonging that must not be passed over in the oblivion of the 'etiolating veil of everydayness,' that the modern reader finds himself behind. By attending to things with piety, to actual things with weight, history and substance, as 'vessels' to use Rilke's term, attending to them in way that allows the thing to shine forth, to let beings be, the dwelling place can be sought and protected.

Michael is the figure enacting out the basic, fundamental character of human being, which is *dwelling* by means of *care*. This goes for the Housewife too. And Luke is an especially relevant and contemporary character in that he forgets his dwelling, and the place within which his dwelling-place emerged. How easy, then, to lose sight of this basic character of being, told by Wordsworth in a tone that seemed inevitable in the darkening shadow that *techne* throws across the world of *poesis*, - the letting be of beings.

By caring for things, mortals allow things to thing, giving them the room to breath. Mortals dwell in so far as they care. Michael and Housewife care. But mortals can never be isolated from the earth, sky, and the divinities. They are enfolded into one another in their own ways and styles of enfolding. As soon as mortals stop caring, stop letting the stream run its course, and the earth to blossom, and the sky to shine and darken on its own accord, the light of the divinities to shine, they lose sight of dwelling. Like Luke, they get caught up in the race of oblivion and build not to dwell, to let beings be, but to challenge and to violate and to lose the abiding sense of what it means to be in place, to be truly near to things.

It is as if Wordsworth invites the reader to go seek out the sheepfold of Michael. Standing beside the ruins, the modern reader would be forced to confront himself with a question: 'am I ready to re-build these ruins, can I truly dwell?'

Conclusion

In my own poetry I attempt, over and over again, to describe the sacredness of the natural world invoked by the body's emplacement amidst physical things. By quiet interrogation of sense-experience, by attentively watching, listening, engaging my sense to the natural world, the poetry that arose from a greater awareness of the rapport between body and world, speaks *of* the natural world, a poetry that is the *body thinking* with a voice that belongs to the song of the earth.

As I wrote each chapter I was forced to return my own creative writing and test it against the things that I had discovered through my philosophical and spiritual research. Phenomenology inspired me to adopt and practice a radical naivety in the face of the world, and to see things anew. Out of this grew a sense of the ineffable that sits at the heart of sense-experience, the bit of light that shines within and around every created thing, each bit of light coming from the greater light of a disturbing presence, a numinous energy that pervades the universe, such as Wordsworth wrote about in 'Tintern Abbey.' From this, the sense of place became prominent, not merely named places on maps, but those places where the belonging together of body, nature and spirit happens, those places that first of all let this gathering together of body, nature and spirit occur.

In the writing and the researching of the thesis I have often undergone alterations in the manner in which I write and interrogate the world. There has been a constant interchange between my own poetry and the themes that I have critically elucidated in the thesis.

During my investigations into phenomenology for the first chapter I found that my own writing underwent changes. Symbols, metaphors, became replaced by real events, real things. Poems such as 'Father's Diary' and 'Mother's Diary,' depict a subject whose grip on the world of nature, home and family is mediated to him through scraps, parts of a world, gathered together in a diary that is a kind of museum to a lost world of actual interaction between home, family and nature. The diaries were finally cast aside, and the world as it stands, here and now in the fullness of the present, not in the faded pages of the past, is depicted in such poems as 'Keyhaven Harbour,' and 'The Wind.'

The stance I took toward the world became, by degrees, less apart, and more a part of the world. I, too, like the phenomenologist, desired to adopt a radical naivety in the face of the world and achieve a primordial contact with things and within this rapport, discover that I am, through my body, entirely a part, an expression even, of the sensuous world. Discovering that I cannot, in no way, even in abstract, conceptual thought, extricate myself from the environment because *I am a body*, meant I had to write poetry, describe the world of experience, in a manner that remained true to that intercorporeal discovery. By looking directly at things and sensuously exploring the world, by allowing the *body that I am* to guide my awareness into dialogue with other shapes of awareness, trees, animals, the motion of the wind and waters, by letting the otherness of things beckon my senses to engage in a conversation with them, spoken in a bodily language older and more profound than human words, my own creative writing became a descriptive exercise obedient to the phenomenological truths that I had discovered. Just as I wrote about in the first chapter concerning the discovery of the Natural Self in the poet Ted Hughes, I too went in search of my Natural Self, and I wanted to let the Natural Self write poetry, the Self that is an expression of nature just as rain and owls and the swirling of leaves are.

Chapter two became the corollary of achieving this primordial contact with things, resulting in the discovery of the numinous light en-seeded within each thing, a divine fecundity spreading through the sensuous world. Marriage to reality led to the birth of spirituality.

My research into nature-mysticism and into the history of mysticism, the poetical works of R.S. Thomas, and spiritual-environmental writers such as Thomas Merton and Thomas Berry, pure mystics such as Meister Eckhart, and particularly the writings of the philosopher of religion Martin Buber, encouraged me to pursue my endeavours to experience, through devoted attentive to the natural world, the divinity within the natural world. And my own writing progressed from the description of my attempts to achieve a primordial oneness with nature, to the realisation that this oneness was sacred, holy, a gift even from the divine fecundity. My character 'Edward Swin,' that forms part of larger sequence of poems not included in the collection, is someone for whom the world is both visceral and spiritual. Edward Swin is the symbolic figure of the spiritual in the corporeal. I invented him at the turn of progressing from the intercorporeal to the incorporeal, the incorporeal entwined like a thread of light through the carnal fibres of the intercorporeal. Blood and light.

But all this was still related to place. I could not forget place, the places, where the above experiences were fostered and attuned. I certainly became more conscious of the necessity of writing from *where* both the intercorporeal and the spiritual event occurred, and of harnessing myself to the places where the bodily and the holy were intertwined. In the context of my own poetry, *home* was the place that I focused upon. In reading Heidegger and Wordsworth in conjunction, the critical necessity of fostering intimacy with things of the home became the prominent theme in my writing. Characters such as Gwilym Jones, and my own immersion in home, with my family's relationship to the natural world, and the community of family situated within the larger inhuman community of the natural world, bespeak the importance of place, the happening of place through the inherent potency of things.

In the course of this project, I lived each chapter. I lived each of the three themes to the point that they seeped into and enriched my own writing and my own styles of engaging the world. I set out not just to bounce some philosophical and spiritual ideas around that may or may not be linked to my own writing, but rather to delve deeply and concisely into the three themes, - *Body, Spirit, Place* - that are at the forefront of my writing, and to clarify them in spiritual and philosophical contexts, situating my own writing not only alongside the three poets that mean the most to me, Ted Hughes, R.S. Thomas and William Wordsworth, but with other thinkers, writers and philosophers.

Plunging back into the sensuous world, discovering the light of divinity in its murky depths, and knowing the place in which these discoveries are made, are themes which can be treated not just through the lens of poetry, but also through the lens of philosophy and spirituality. As well as deepening and improving my own writing through engaging with intellectual traditions outside of poetry, there are avenues of dialogue that can be opened up between these intellectual traditions, - a sharing of knowledge, - in service of rejuvenating and celebrating the natural world, the Earth, as the primary context of our lives and the primary referent towards which all of our artistic and intellectual endeavours must refer back to in a style of reverence and thanks.

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Finding The Room

Only a god can explain how I feel about the earth...

The Stone Wall

Gwilym Jones, daily you decline my helping hand
to restore the old stone wall around your farm.

A crow is pecking out an injured ewe's eyes,
tearing her teats that spill milk into the mud.
Her lamb is crying out from Clogwyn Mawr.
The cuckoo's flute is out of tune.

You bare your toothless grin
while sparring with an open fire, peeling back mole-skins
with your thumb-nail as though they were
black, deformed potatoes.

An adder's skin floats by on the wind.
Swallows, nattering and defecating upon your gable-end,
will die in their nests you stuff full with poison.

Snowdon is a god keeping a watchful eye
upon your dour, pebble-dash house- an igloo of rust-
swallowed by waves of diesel, bracken and sprockets.

Dog chains rattle in the rainfall of night.
Big Bear crouches over your sleeping mare.

Look, Gwilym, your son is moping back from school,
tired from bullying foreign kids,
scuffing his feet though a desert of gravel,
munching broken biscuits of slate, gargling soot.

At night, you wake to the screams of his night-terrors.
In a gown of bandages and barbed-wire, you limp
outside and fire your shotgun at dark, winged figures
breathing heavily in the trees.

Alien Ruin

Gwilym talked at me
about the quality of his tarmac,

stooping to take a specimen of black grit
between the tweezers
of his finger and thumb,
turning it in front of my eyes, then his eyes,
looking at it for a long time,

amazed as though it were the crown-jewel
of his remote palace, falling sullen
as it warped into a microbe
isolated beneath the glassy lens of his gaze.

Almost a whole hour went by
in the laboratory of his barn
as he stood transfixed,
studying the asphalt for clues
of alien ruin,
traces of a foreign disease
multiplying tirelessly
to overrun the track, his veins,
nerves and bones,

fed by rain, enflamed
by the damp breath of the wind,
swelling into a virus of bruise-coloured frost
seeping out from every pore.

Daffodils in shadow
were burnt, charred black get-well-soon flowers
shivering in his mirroring eyes.

Cold and homesick, nodding politely,
I wondered when
the moment was timely for me
to administer the antidote
of self-inflicted departure,

before he keeled over
and I was found guilty by a judge of ravens
for killing a local mind
with my strange infection.
By the end,
we both required separate quarantine.

Evening Vesper

Sing us a song I said
to the old Welsh shepherd
sharing a bottle of Dorset ale
with a crowd of rich,
young English.

My eyes danced
with a scarlet woman
of the star-high fire,
but finding the waltz too hot,
hectic and close,
Instead I listened

to the distant deep cool
streams of his song
quietly choring up
from the invisible springs of time,
pouring down through
the dark valleys between us,

glowing with a silver light
that was not of the fire, and out
into the ocean of night.
His eyes were closed when he sang.

Firework Night

The swallows have left
Gwilym's house
before the annual burn.

He stuffs flammable eggs-
white-spirit soaked
cotton balls- into their nests,

then lights a match.
The nests are brief night-
lights in the eaves,

hissing like roof stuck cats
in the rain. Once the skeleton
of a baby swallow fell out

as though revived to fly.
A shooting-star run aground.
Gwilym and his glowing son

gathered round to make a wish.
A breeze brushed the black leaf,
cinder-nests away.

That was their firework night,
only they were entertained.
Son and father arsonists.

Now safe and trailing
the liquor of Saharan sunlight
that drips from their fuse-like tails,

the swallows flit over golden dunes
that in no way reminds them
of the dark wet heights of North Wales,

and their hearts catch fire at the sight
of their African home, until the dampening
sadness of spring returns.

Garth Farm

Warfarin sachets, shears,
were racked along shelves.
Between them, on hooks,
hung blunt clippers, crooks.

Ships of rain crashed against
the barn that just shrugged.
Wind got in through gaps,
whipping heaped-hay high

into gold-grey cyclones
that rose, fell, flurrying down
everywhere in astonishing
volumes, wafers and flakes.

I was looking for Peter Garth.
There were land-rovers,
pick-ups, lights were on,
but no-one was leering about.

A black collie, thick-set sly,
lay curled up on coats, snarling
as I passed, giving him a wide
and wary berth that brought me

into a panic room of tractor parts,
ram-leg stumps, trapped growls,
cages crammed with puppies
clambering and yelping.

A raven hopped, swooped
down off a rafter, almost
brushing my head with his wing-
the missed kiss of a blessing.

His feathers could've dreamily
caught in my hair- I felt
cold pulses of air from his wing
beat upon my face. A shadow,

he merged into the dark outside
world swiftly spun into a blur
by the horizontal hands
of the storm. Waiting for a man

whom I did not know in a place
that was new to me, dizzying
with the strong, grabbing smell of use-
I did not last for long. The puppies

shut-eye, the black dog shuffled
like a weight of dust pushed
through dust, tin doors creaked
on hinges turned countless times

by people like me and not like me.
Sharp, splinter hay whirled around
in scattered crowns voices of the
indoor wind wore. Out of doors,

the rocky farm track was a stream
I could not ford, and I could not,
in that life of rain, ford my way back
in. The raven demolished the stars.

Hearing Things

Emlyn is stood upon his father's
humpbacked field,
playing fetch with his new terrier

that leaps up at him, yapping,
and he laughs when it runs
in circles around a dead tree.

His father's dog cannot take its eye
off the dodderly sheep, eager to bite
at their blister-pustule heels.

Emlyn urgently turns to face
Clogwyn Mawr,
as though he has heard

a strange, interesting sound.
He just stands there for ages
in an upright delirium

as his terrier pesters the blind horse,
looking up at the mountain, listening,
while fine sunlight touches his eyes

then withdraws, leaving blank
traces of infant gold
in a face born old, and getting older.

Local Gossip

We drive through Bethesda
to reach the bays of Ynys Mon.

The town sits beneath
the raised ocean of the Carneddau.

The abandoned quarries
are the slate beaches of hell
where the ghosts of miners writhe.

Below coughs the Afon Ogwen,
half dammed by needles, bags,
memories of the last otter.

An old woman stops in front of our car,
shaking and stooping
to pocket discarded loo roll,

a smoking, pregnant girl
stood in front of a warehouse
with boarded doors
drives another nail
into her unborn child's wings.
Angel of death.

A man goes by with a rung-less ladder strapped
to his bicycle. The shadow of a spider
pulses upon his brow.

What will become of these people?
The rain never ends but nothing ever grows.

This is the past that cannot become present.
Any effort to resuscitate her
is flogging a carcass.

Blood and wool clogs the nostrils of those
who come to inhale the mountain air,
taste the dew that sweetens the sleeves
of their holiday jumpers.

We hurry on through - a rumour
slipping past deaf ears -
and alone with Amy and our dogs
on our favourite bay
I whisper
this piece of local gossip.

Meeting

I stepped up to the grey house.
The shepherd lingering in the doorway
offered me tea in a leaking cup
I sealed with both hands.
No fresh air and light in the living room.
A stale glow darkened the paintwork,
the rough plaster patched
with unframed pictures of himself
as a boy in the hills of North Wales.
It was a gallery, a forgotten museum,
I paid to enter with a currency of his own:
silence, respect. I imagined a rat of fire
being born in the ancient bed of ash
that trembled in the fire-grate
as we stomped counter-clockwise
around the room studying his pictures,
stopping side by side at the midnight hour
of a small window with a view
across to Crib Goch.
He took the wet cup from my hands.
Then he sternly looked me in the eye,
threatening that I only moved here
to move him off his land,
and that he'll shoot my dogs
if they just look at his sheep.
His cracked lips hardly shaped
the words he spat out
as though he were a dummy
for an older voice to speak through.
I backed away toward the outside,
comforting noise of the muted wind
rattling gutters, trees and dog-chains.
Dressed up in the chequered green suit
he wore especially to greet me in,
he stayed by the small window in the dark.

Not Yet Welcome

He was that big man
by the dead oak in dark rain,

wearing a broad wax hat
concealing half of a stroppy face,
and a heavy foot-length coat
unmoving in the wind.

The axe was match-stick small in his hands
as he chopped wood,
brushing four-bit split logs
off the stump ledge into sheep beaten mud.

There was a speed of sadness in his swing,
soundless and clipped, hunkered.

No rest taken as the axe cut through the log's light heart,
wedging into the wood surface below,
shaken free with one-handed ease, thrown high,
the axe head dusty with a dull-gleam.

Only now after a full year
watching his days, do I realise
that man was Gwilym Jones,
an upright giant who ignored my nod
in the amassing collapse of rain.

The logs lie stacked and scattered in his porch,
damp and diseased,
fuel for his evening fires that do not burn well,

a pale ash, ghost-skin rage smouldering and smoking,
spitting into his lap
from the rattling urn of his hearth.

Spring Gathering

I went with Emlyn
to gather in sheep
from Clogwyn Mawr.

Two collie-dogs,
Nel and Fly, ran
rings around us.

A white glimmer,
the dogs were off,
sprinting into woods.

Nel danced wide right
into shadow, Fly darted
into scissoring light.

Emlyn and I kept on
climbing to the top,
scrambling up the ridge

of sharp massive rock,
lichens were luminescent
scribbles in the sun.

The black cross of a raven
swished into view,
dangling its twig-legs down

as though to grab prey,
or land, but it just dawdled,
switching its head to-fro,

then on a cold gust rode up
into the blue immensity of the sky;
a black star with clouds

of torn moons sailed behind it.
It was not only the flowers
that were letting go their gifts:

the wind grew in strength,
vividness, and from the summit
I could see Snowdonia unfolding

its mountains and valleys
petalled with light, unleashing
its contours and cwms.

Down below, Nel and Fly
had all the sheep pouring
through lowland bog-

dirty milk deltas through paradise-
hemmed together toward
an iron cage where Emlyn stood

watching, commanding,
and his Father, Gwilym,
whistled beside him, while I,

the one not gathered, couldn't
stop watching Snowdonia be
released from winter by spring,

and the raven, returned to ground,
shook out tomb-hoary air,
and loosened its grip on the rock.

Central Enigma

Counting the broken abacus of rain in a glance
I see the sparrowhawk on his way

stopped by the wind. In the wind he stops,
he is still, compliant and obedient.

The wind nags at his wings a little,
rocks him, but he is not rickety,

testing his easy patience
hard won
in this heather-ferret,
crag and loom-shadow world.

Clouds, amassing bulk, flare up and out
blackening bigger than the mountains.

The sparrowhawk slides on a tilted wire
two trees to the left and dangles
at a slight angle,

then straightens, quaking, quivering, -

a pianist's hand poised
over the first key
of his first concert performance

before the hushed audience
of the incipient storm, -

collecting rain on his wings that are never,
except in unbearable death,
weighed down into weights where feathers
are so heavy they are as light as less than air.

Whether it is the wind that moves him
or that he really moves himself

such is the huge storm of a question
gathering over the head of everything

whose answer cannot be found in counting
this broken abacus of rain.

The First Morning

I slightly raise the blinds
and see an old man singing
in a deep voice
as he braces his right arm
around a ram's throat
as it tip-toes and slips on ice.
As the only secret audience
at the stadium of his sheepfold,
it is hard to find reason to cheer.
Pellet-hail dulls into soft shocks
of a January dawn,
a bird of black ice breaks loose
croaking from the rock-hard wind.

Yesterday, I was in the warm woods
of a southern district
where a thousand trees wafted
in the breath of horses.
Today, I have woken up inside
the gut of Snowdonia
where darkness can hardly lift
above this cold world
where darkness is made

by the sound of the old man singing
a welsh gospel of frost,
by the sight of blood, a hot liquor,
dribbling from the ram's slit throat,
by a young boy waiting for the old man
to take him to school,
and by a dark bird flying toward a mountain
clamped in a silent pain of snow
where wounds of grass show through.

Keyhaven Marshes

No wind, but a power wide and strong flows
from the glowing horizon across Keyhaven
Marshes. Sky-ship V's of geese blow apart,
lagoon waves rise and roll spluttering along
the cement sea-wall, turnstones crouch in
their tiny feed dens, the cross-shaped mud-
flat danger-sign groans, and the daylight is
clearly rushed to brighten by shocks of air.
Blasted characters with hawk-quick looks
hold fast in a world almost torn to shades
and ashen pieces. Egrets, herons, deftly fight
for their stillness as I emerge from behind
candle crowned gorse, lit and hit once firmly,
right here, by a sure winged hand of calm.

Waylaid

I stood on the outside of the fold
as Gwilym taught Emlyn
on how to tackle, arrest brute ewes
between his knees for the injection.
Too weak and slow, the boy,
a stumbling skittle, was knocked down
into mud by those woollen wrecking balls.
The corrugated iron wall shook.
He cowered, not from blurred strikes
of white heat, but from the cold shadow
of Gwilym darkening the fold
like a starless night. The shivering ewes
were scattered pieces of a frost shattered moon.
Idly remaining in marginal daylight,
no room in the pen for me to help out
lugging sheep luggage, I watched on
as Gwilym wrestled a sheep
into the locked clamp of his knees,
stabbing her in the throat with a needle
again and again and again.
Empowered, chucked back aghast
by his own strength, turning to Emlyn
who lay waylaid, breathless and hurt
in the fold corner, he shouted,
spitting at the boy that he's only of use
in the life of his dead mother's dreams.

At Keyhaven Harbour

Harbour fish sip at hulls, masts tilt and clack.
A salt breeze whisks by
with a cormorant in it, a coiled rope
suns itself on the pontoon,

children dangle crab-lines down
from crackled-paint railings, their buckets
are filled with waiting promises of water.
Mid-air a crab falls twirling with bacon-rind
pinched between its pincers.

A bright blue net like the sky but fainter
is getting mended on the jetty
by two tattooed men dipping, purling
bunched twine through and over
split stitching; a constant silent music
of healing. One of the men stops, flicks

his cigarette-butt into the air,
its lit tip spins passed an old man's face
whose eyes are closed in deep contentment,
reverence or remembering. It is hard to tell.
His hands hang down by his sides.

The dark peace of things as they are
is the wisdom that the old man
in his alert sleep sees. A swan drifts
across his mind. Harbour fish bob up
through reflected clouds, masts clack,
distant reeds breathe and sigh, breathe and sigh.

Another Astronomy

Smoke from garden-fires
clouds the stars above the house.

Does home now become an instant
constellation or a preparation to be made so?
From town, brother, we have walked
an avenue of observatories
to the final one before the sea.

The father rummaging to fix a fuse,
a mother's voice is a night-light in a black-out.
Then there are those breathings
prior to what we deem as ours.

We linger in the flicker of porch-light
on the dew-decked lawn
among glistening beads of reflected fires
that burst in nervous hands
as we kneel to make stars of the ground,
trying to mimic how mum would sew.

Nightly you tell me the science
of how bricks can bruise inward at dusk
then you drink the water from my bedside table
so I go thirsty through my dreams.

Contagious

Ignorant of a girl I met on a carousel
was the sole-survivor of a ghost town
I showed her pictures of my living relatives:

One where my mother is laughing
at a skylight rattle on a windless night;
one where my father is huddled up crying

in an armchair in a stranger's house;
one where my brother is reaching out to catch,
kiss and sniff leaves through black iron bars.

Then I tell her about the son I'm going to have
who will name himself before he can speak
with an undying sparkler on November the fifth.

'Take me home' she said, 'so I can realise...'
I haven't seen her since that rendezvous.
My heart beats one less each day and I heard

from sources hers beats one more.
Even those I love pass through me with increasing ease.
So I spurn myself to memories of flesh and reflections

while I roll a robin's wing between finger and thumb,
and the ground I need to walk upon is a lump
of acidic earth soon to dissolve into voiceless darkness.

Father's Diary

Flick through for me your diary of unsaid prayers,
bound by leather from the ox that drove the cart
along the red-dust track down the plateau into town.

Sand from your first encounter with a sandstorm
has clogged up the spine along with half a feather
from a frigate birds back. Moving on,

a page's centre is damp from the enormous
water-drops caught from the base of Victoria Falls.
The next page is scored with your black ink etching

of a Baobob you call Mowana, whose roots
have erupted and stretched web-like over a lion's den.
I look up from the page and it is dark already.

Tonight, I want to have a black sleep alive
with one or two images- a Kalihari sand-grain
sliding down an Elephant's swinging tusk,

as he makes his way to wallow in a bend
of the Okavango. I have slept walked all these years
though all the scenes you have stored into me,

often wondering why you have yet to take me there,
to see the famous, silent lighting, to measure my hand
against the paw-print of an African Hunting Dog.

Mother's Diary

Locks of Saddleworth heather tassel
the rough spine of the diary you cradle
in your lap as if it were the daughter

you were meant to bear. Open it slowly
as though you were waking her from
her first dream. Tar-black dust of

out-house brick from your home on
Vesper Row freckles the first page.
An immaculate white strip of cotton

from Ilkley Mill intertwined with threads
of your golden-auburn hair bookmarks
the centre of the diary; the pages are blank

but they ream with pain. Keep turning
as the world turns. One of the wingless
wasps of thousands your brother

slipped beneath your bed-sheets buzzes
under a strap of celotape. A detailed etch
of your left eye before it welled blind

with darkness and cloud sits in the heart
of the penultimate page. Now we come
to the end: neat writing tells of how

you nursed an injured wren to health
then kissed her wings before you threw
her from your hand to the sky. The writing

gets too small too read. I ask for more.
You whisper in my ear how the bird
hit the ground. You shut the book and go.

A Figure in The Doorway

I see my mother standing at the back door
in her long lavender gown.

She wonders what's become of this house,
seeing no clearer as long as she looks
through a few straggled hairs
that the wind beats about her eyes.

The lawn has grown two or three inches
since the last gasp of rain.

The clematis and rose in the trellis
have petals to shed,
to be raked away as autumn leaves
and burnt when he gets home.

Everyday the same raven comes
to pick and jab his way amongst
last nights half finished dinner
and breakfast for four.

A cobweb glistens between table and chair
where we used to squeeze through
and run round to the door
that we opened because she shut it.

Now locked away in some warp of things
that no memory can tally with

she seems to fear the silence
of what must become-

the hallway wilting into emptiness,
bumps rising in the dust filled carpet
because of a floorboard
no foot has stepped down flat.

She hangs on watching a wind get snagged in the tree

like once when I saw a white fawn get tangled
in a loose bundle of barbed wire
where each push and extra breath worsened the hectic pain.

A Visit

Black-out in Bateley Mill.
My Grandfather, to work
in the dark, worked in
the dark, to home in the dark,

slouched during a break
over a coarse plywood
desk, glowed in the dark
because of his flour-dusted

apron, forearms and face,
poised his head owl-slow
in position to hold his breath,
factory lights dimmed alarmingly

distant as stars, rats fidgeted
in the pipes. No wonder then,
after my Mother seeing him
like that, went through a phase

of running from the moon.

Wait

I never once saw you wash his tough-skin feet
or rub his calloused hands with scented oils.
Only once, I think, did I see you glance at him
in the mirror when you happened to pass that way
out into the free night, only that to your disgrace
the path from the door led to the sea each time.
So you watched the soothing moonlit foam of waves
gather like a salt bath in a rock pool for your pain.
And does he know where you go at night,
does his knowledge extend that far?
I suppose he might as well count the stars,
measure his life by the weight of fog-laden air.
He will hold you soon. I'm sure of it.
Tell the earth to wait. You need time to prepare.

Evening Ceremony

She bathed me in peaceful water,
pausing like a soloist mid-song
to change rhythm, scooping, pouring

with a Mauritian shell of roseate-
gloss and pearl-patina, untying
bags of steam, letting loose moths

of lavender foam exploding
in a cannonade of blows. White rain
released down the silken slides

of her wrists, piercing soap-sud
films stretched between her finger-tips.
Tempted to take a sip, I tasted

its bitterness unlathering on my
bottom lip. I was often shocked
breathless by the cold ceramic touch

of wet white tiles when I sleepily
leaned too far, tipping the meniscus.
After picking out pine-needles

from under my nails, scrubbing
my heels smooth with a worn nub
of grey pumice, she prized open

the chainless plug, adding to the tally
of scratches on its big silver button,
towel-dried each of my hairs

in diminishing mist, then left me clean
to go weave new night-clothes,
closing the door tight to lock out drafts

that have been known to duck me under
into a dream of drowning in a reservoir
beneath a sheet of aching Antarctic ice.

Young Rain

A young rain has fallen.
With all the fragments that remain
what picture would you choose
for me to piece together?
I have a picture in mind-

Your factory gone to waste,
lovingly abandoned. Skips and cranes
on their sides. Ballast-sacks empty
of all metal contents, wind-folded
and thrown out of sight.
The car-hill reduced to a wheel
rolling across the yard. A ghost of dust
swirling around the baler. Sparrows
tumbling down from a telegraph pole
to wash their backs in a pot-hole pool.
The steel gates shut on lorries,
voices your father introduced to you
are finally interrupted, forgotten.
A silence is restored like no other.

And you are there, an old man,
bending down to the ground
where brass taps and oil
would've littered the tarmac,
picking up a grass-blade, lifting it up
to the sun. This could be
a sign of peace with the earth.
A young rain has fallen.

A Cold Day

Frost sheathed iron, tungsten-rings,
zinc-nuggets and shackles dulled
by ice bespattered. It is after noon,

the metals haven't thawed their skins
of mid-arctic glaze. I think of a robin
whose wings were frozen in the nest.

We move numb-slow, heavy with blood
we fear isn't thicker than water.
Workmen slink nimbly between scrap-

labyrinths and steaming machines.
To us it seems they dance in spring.
We have fostered a winter between us,

transmitting it to what we touch
and ache toward. If this be the case,
then the further we roam apart

the warmer both of us will be.
I through grass, you amongst steel.
Tonight, we should sit by fires in separate rooms.

Swifts

Happy again the swifts are back
in acrobatic aerial war
along the slumped ridge of the cliff,
arrowing down narrow Becton,
their reflections shimmer
on the black-waters of Natterjack,
then they spin down Dilly Lane
where you Father,
Father you stand stupefied
by the beauty of their flock,
amazed that one sleeps on the wing,
that a scattering sinew of earth
can still return with such vigour
and I Father, I am in there somewhere
or miles behind at the path's start
trying to get to you so wait,
wait for me and remember me
and together we can fear the Hobby,
how its bolt leaves a quick bruise in the blue,
a flash of underwing,
its dodging of wrong thermals
for the right one his wings will love
that will dive him beak-ward
straight into a Swift's heart
with the ease of perpetual practice.
But we Father,
we have the one time to get it right,
to hit the red target and remain there.

Consider This

Here we have no shotguns, no shacks to burn,
re-build re-burn, no iron coyotes haunting
the bayou, toughened tornadoes brandishing
lightning. There, you can break what you want.

Here is mirror-crisp. I breathe fragile frost-
shocked air. Innocent vandal, give me back
my glass goblet of rain decorated with
delicate herons, slow bolts from the blue,

like porcelain Gods sluggish over the sullen,
widespread face of the deep. Even our horses
are mild-thighed. Leeches make fine black
crystal bracelets. The sun is often lost in a

mayhem of cloud. This is my makeshift Eden.
I re-make it like pottery with secret tools
every dawn before you've finished dreaming,
but it shatters into a irretrievable mosaic

of the moon by the merest thought of you.
You must change your tact if you wish to be
welcome here. Don't let this turn into a fiasco.
Just say, say that I have tried and tried again.

Glow-Worms

I write for my brother's garden of glow-worms
as he leads our jet-lagged Mother through it
by the hand. A humming-bird arrives to inspect

his daughter's eye, then withdraws to hover
at the opening of spring's first flower. A tractor
hub glows like a starry wreath beneath a shed

built from planks of salvaged moonlight, a rose
of glassy petals flickers in fire-fly light. And here,
in our world, where our Father and I sedately

discuss the meaning of quiet homes over a bluish
gong, friendships form in corners behind curtains,
a retired bricklayer weighs a brick in his hand,

sounds of old plumbing unnerve a plumber's
apprentice, thatch-layers are prized apart by the
scalpel surgery of rain, a neighbours allergy

kicks off at the mere memory of dust, bedroom
and garage windows are stained with unknown names.
Mother, you make me think about home as you sing

a half-learnt lullaby to your granddaughter while
she dozes with three pairs of socks on, glow-worms
in a matchbox tucked beneath her pillow for when

she needs to light her way to you in the night,
down corridors and halls of mirrors rocking mad-men
from side to side. Be awake when she finds you.

A Nocturnal Pact

Grass munched peppered with ear-wigs,
hover-flies that tremored amazed us more
than hawks tethered to God's hand of blue.

Brothers dream of being brothers again
where the paint-faded fence met the house
and in that corner, kneeled in nettle and dock-leaves,

you stepped up onto my back, hauled yourself over
then thumped down upon the neighbour's weird arena.
Strange, unforgiving you returned after time,

slinkd away into obscurity with bruised shins,
starving stomach and asthmatic lungs.
I hear your screaming coda of growing-pains

from where you must of vanished to-
closer than breath, further off than I can imagine.
I stand where cob-webs shake and ivy grips a brick.

Finding The Room

I hear him at night
dragging a chair around a dark room.

Wooden legs bump and scrape
over flooring cobbled
by years of hard pacing.

Dust in the air is a dance
of mummified flies, rising and falling
upon the trapped sea of his breath.

He will never stop pulling that chair,
wearing it thin to unbalanced points,
until I , and whoever else can hear
his restless commotion,

finds that room,
and sits in that chair,

so that he, freed from his nightmare
of absent song, can take his place

beside a window cleaned
by his tattered sleeve every hour
in preparation for our uncertain arrival,
risking his sanity,

and show us, beginning
at the edge of a dark hill,

the birth of light.

The Wind

Like a guest the wind comes rapping unannounced
thirsting for stone.

I offer it my body and health
but it wants the softening bone
of a mountain calf
storm-stranded and slavering on a ledge
bullied by a cloud of biting clegs.

I offer it the best of my blood
but it wants syringe-injections
of the river's elixir,
my own experience of water
poisons and taints.

I offer it my ideas
but it wants the weight of a peregrine's heart
as it dives within
the finished punch of terminal velocity
towards the chalky rolling plasma of the cold sea.

I offer it my imperfect bible of dreams
but it wants the authentic signature of the sun
and a fierce douse
of its rare golden wine.

I offer it my memories
but it wants to suck dew from the light-underside
of a holly leaf and cherish air from a badger's ear.

I offer it my poems
but it wants to compose an orchestra of siskins, oaks and snow.

The wind scrams by me low
refusing my almost anonymous charity like a beggar
empowered towards richer givers, wealthier hosts.

It is good to be spared by having nothing to give.

The Mute Swan

He was like the first paper-aeroplane I made
then left out in the night: hefty with damp,
scrunched and chilled by strangling fists of dew,
rolling and slapping upon my heaven's beach

with every flow and undertow of morning tide.
Water burst out like kettle-steam through a hole
in his chest as if from a stranded whale's
blow-hole. Who could shoot a mute swan?

Was it some suspicious fisherman blaming
him for the year of no fish? Or did lightning
sear out the numinous flashing of his heart?
His time on earth was up, up, and down.

I dragged him by the turgid hose of his neck
through shells and sand. His wings, shrivelled
by salt, snapped back when I unfolded them
to the broad expanse they once were. Wind

rustled the once cashmere-down of his feathers
now constricted by cuffs of crust. And the smell:
egret breath, faecal, sulphuric. Guava-like blood
dribbled from the winter-wheat grain of his bill.

The ingot seed and flair of his eyes were now
pinches of mustard white. It was a staggering
commotion when he laboured to fly in an attack
of every wing-beat. Turnstones, busy in the kelp-

mats, scattered in an alarm of ear-piercing bray.
Torso of a marshland angel, caved-in and stunned
by vice of wave and star, forgive me that all I
could do was bury you in what I know: root-foyers

worming beneath a twisted oak. I firmly believe I too
will be bored through, hollowed out and hauled
into your nest of sky and twigs where you'll be clamouring
with the sun in your bill to put it where my heart is.

The April Cormorant

By the edge of a reed-bed I found her
lolling and seething for breath.

Yesterday's wind wasn't strong enough
to revive the dying blue flame of her eyes,

her wings ribboned in an opium of disease
unable to flower into flight,

unable to hug her sides in a streamline dive
for a spinning shoal-flash of fish.

Still enticed by the grey waters lapping a rock
from where she could draw her inner maps

of holy sonar across the bay, she shuffled,
gaspd, gurgled to swing her head upward

toward the iron-sky's swelling bruise of rain
then collapsed, buckling under the drowsy weight

of her honey-comb bones and the leaden pressure
of my remote human eye.

I lost my faith in spring then approached on my knees
with nothing to give, no cure,

no draught of pristine oxygen to fuel her lungs,
to regenerate the swill of her cormorant blood-

she was terrified of me like a child is
of shadows growing across the wall of his room-

only a woollen cloud of blanket to fold
cold darkness around her, to softly dry her wings

while she sank deeper and deeper
into a midnight-cot of her own- holding my breath

as I carried her unbearably light body- breathing again
when I passed her over into a stranger's hands.

The Ewe and The Olive Tree

Our sandals flicked dust
into her maroon eyes.
Hornets bobbed above her
spilt fluid and placenta

baked hard into a black
and red crust in the oven
of the olive tree's shade.
Plump veins lined her

stomach distended with
the size of an unborn lamb.
Her wool was shivering
alive with flies and fear.

The branches were shook
by a crow ruffling-up
for a meal. He wasn't scared
away by the gun-shots

of our claps. Crisp leaflets,
crumpled in the sun's fists,
showered down upon her
in delicate, whispering rasps.

Copper bells rattled around
the Naxos mountains:
a herd of echoes lost from
the shepherd of their sounds.

Rocks shone lime-white
in the heat, the light hurt.
No wind. Cypresses caught
fire with stillness, and blazed.

Her breathing was beating
as slow as a heart in a
sleeping body, and her heart
was weaker than her breathing.

She closed her eyes, and died
with the weight of our dust and
the little leaves upon them.
Two skulls and a farrago of bones.

Tadpoles

Amy, you should've spent your life guarding
tadpoles from herons, people and drought.
At every step on our walk to Llyn Crafnant,
you stop to scrutinize puddles peppered

with tadpole eggs, clogged with spawn that
wobbles when you give it a thickness test.
We walk so slowly to give you time, but time
runs away and you shrink into a child again

in yellow wellingtons speckled with mud,
happiest on your own, missing your minor
part in a play because you're outside peering
down the microscope of a well at tadpoles.

Or you're in your dad's bedraggled garden
collecting them in a jam-jar, giving each one
a cartoon role: gymnast, bin-man, artist, nun-
selecting the dregs and elect to exhibit on sills.

I disappear entirely from the day until your
tired eyes need horizons, and you catch up
with time that's waited, like me, to witness
your wriggling, sudden spurt into adulthood.

The Day

When my nieces arrive from Arkansas, I am going to take them to Maltreath on a fine day. In this order, we will make little aquariums by prodding crabs down razor-shell slides into pools replenished by sunlight and surf. Then, play aqueous music patting jellyfish as though they were translucent tambourines, avoiding Lion's Mane, Box, Man O' War; maraca rocks to the stonechat's clack, stare the gull's flight into our own bird of hearts; sift and pan for quartz through sieve hands; swim, and lastly, dry off beside a stick house of fire in which ash and ember creatures roam in a cramped inferno, frazzle, smoke and die. For years after their visit, my nieces will find sand in their shoes. And their hair, salt seeded, will flower golden in their old age when I am gone to the cloud-shadows of reaping sharks.

Ice-Frog

On the snow-pebble bed
of a clear, Ozark creek,

my niece, Sarah-Grace,
found an ice-frog.

She dived down into blue
water, and came up

laughing with a crystal
amphibian pursed in her hands.

Cold, wet, porcelain skin;
ornament of frozen light

shining in the Arkansas sun
held above her head

as she paddled, but
before reaching the bank

to show me, the frog thawed
into a tendon of water

flexing, spilling, through
her finger's, over her eyes,

and back into the creek,
resuming its poised,

petrified spot upon
the snow-pebble creek bed.

Source

I have far to go.
The heron by the river
in the garlic wood is there.

Making Sense at the Gwyle

Leaves, siblings of leaves, frank against day,
found the wind-flow and followed my breath's direction.

I caught you talking to a river bend,
commencing obvious, Chinese whispers
with the sea-bound beck
purling through weaves and looms of trees.

Then you plunged both hands
beneath the weed-blocked bank
searching for the eel you dreamt
slipped between your ears
and wallowed in a head-pool
that cooled and cleared
by finger-clicks to the sun.

I cannot help but take part,
tearing up a picture of you,
floating each piece
on separate petals to where, I hope,
you're in mind for gathering.

The fragments are ours to reimburse across time.

I puzzle you down beneath a bald-star whisked with hair-light
whose smile is the crescent moon off to the right
now my thumb-nail at your sleeping face
brushing over the pelt and scut of your eyebrow
that's a wolf, dormant and dead and living.

I shall not settle on this tilth,
leaving this lair unguarded
except by an ash leaf on fire
that fought free from a brash-burn,
now orbiting the rim of your body
that's decked in the scurf
rubbed off between the friction
of this world and that one.

Here is the river
and I hear you say from the other side...

Only the whistle of a bird with no name
sounds throughout the dene.

Master of the Seven Rooms

I

In the first room: a rat's giblets, rough books,
jotters stuffed in boot-racks, cubicles where
wet tissues were pelted, arrows of ice-chisel
light splintering the archaic dark, one box-
window lined with resin, forged sick-notes,
broken-strap satchels with fluffed velcro,
buttons of gum stuck beneath the benches.
There was more, there will always be more
in the first room. Kiss-chase with shades,
mandolin strings stretched as trip-wires
between the doorway. Not once did Master
knock and enter our ballroom of dreams.
We twiddled our thumbs until day end. Mother
arrived right on time for the dreams to last.

II

In the second room: 'Good morning Master,'
and his posse taking timetabled turns to preach
from mahogany eagle lecterns. A tired choir
in baggy robes mimed forgettable hymns
from a risen stage of rocking pews. Reverend's
pungent halitosis, the way he compared God
to a waterfall of Granny-Smiths. The second
room of a red Christ in stained glass window
faintly embossed, that Adam, the new kid,
smashed with a sling-shot. The furlong aisle
he was dashed face-first down. Head-boy tolled
the brass, fuchsia-shaped bell, forcing him to eat
sweet bread generously buttered with dust.
We all whistled and jeered, no one dared not to.

III

In the third room: kids whispered blasphemy
to the home-odour of their kit bags, old
valentine cards from Big Sis and Mother,
years worth of winter field mud, piss-wet
duffle coats, detention slips, seam-bits and
yo-yo's, name tags, a stolen altar cloth one boy
dried his hair with, Master's candle-snuff
bent over a snapped row of pegs. We were
punctual to the third room, it was the central
oracle of our world where we all took turns
to speak in the right key and began to plot,
along with the rain, to flood the school
and to survive the year in a renegade ark.

IV

In the fourth room: long varnished tables, too clean cutlery, manners, graces said and giggled through. A girl was made to stand skirt down on a chair and to sing happy birthday to herself. Master smirked through the steaming reek of sloppy lunch, the girl, pushed back down, ate chips and semolina soggy with tears. In the fourth room I hoped to learn how to cope with humiliation and noise. 'They only break you,' my Father said, 'to build you up again into a mansion furnished with unending riches to offer to the world.' 'Such as what?' I back-talked. He clipped me round the ear. I urged to hear a freshly ancient voice emit from fire.

V

In the fifth room: the tide of classes, the moon of my first girlfriend's heart, thoughts like snow drifting elsewhere. Choicest chalk stubbed and crumbled beneath the raging pressure of Master teaching God knows what, Maths and Geography mixed in perhaps, the black-board like a black-hole at times. Adam snored and etched obscenities into the desk top with a compass point, rattling his tuck penny-full pocket in secret joy. Master hurled a shoe at him, hitting Adam square between his eyes. The moments before the bruise appeared were agonising. Adam, banished, ran off claiming blood was soaking into his brain. Lessons continued. I found an ant in my briefcase.

VI

In the sixth room: blood of wood knotted into
our measling knee-caps, the matron's silent
haberdasher, threat of lice and measles, the
stone-staircase, the great clock at the far end,
snot and vomit smeared into the bed-sheets
and pillows, mould freckling the basin rims.
'Wash your face boy, otherwise I'll haunt you.'
Adam reckoned he was a poltergeist by night
called The Grunian who lived in the forest
beneath the Boom-Boom tree. He held his hand
out, it was nothing but electric shock and air.
Master listened to our oaths and prayers then
put out the light. Adam, meanwhile, was
encamped amongst the stars, smoking probably.

VII

In the seventh room: Master's muffled gossip heard through the bolted door of flaking green paint irresistible to pick. Chestnuts, blue-tack, a leaking ink cartridge packed into our pockets, books tossed frisbee-like into book forts.

The raid began. Adam, the orphan, skewered a robin onto a nail, leaving it to twitch while he lounged on a bean-bag to nibble his pen-lid.

Master belted him thrice around the backs of his legs. Adam covered them up with high socks and said they were birthmarks that came and went like eczema, a seasonal blemish.

Master dictated the Decalogue to his pet lamb while he ran along his golden runways home.

Edward Swin

I heard him before I saw him. He came to me
as rain hissing into rain, then a flash standing
upright to sing his name, Edward Swin-

a stout broad backed baker of holy bread,
a miraculous figure of mystery, a jack of all
immaterial trades, a folklorist of gales,

a discrete photographer of animal silence,
a little sacred man, a bubbling sound of hope.
He kept me up all night like a nagging star,

a dream of insomnia, telling me that he was
everything more or less, a movement of presence,
the injured owl I found suffering amongst

messy bales of old hay. At the foot of my bed
he swayed smiling like happy magnet fire,
showing me arcane insignia tattooed

in lovely riddles from his elbows to his wrists.
He possessed a wild goat's sky-rock stare,
skin as rare and soft as a Snowdonia lilly,

a voice of my mother's, father's, brother's
combined but convincingly harmonised
into a key of no earthly scale, a hymn of all

hymns, a beautiful disturbance. Believe me.
Every thought of his was a snowflake's
blueprint coming to be upon our mountain of time.

The Daimon

The bonfire purred and wagged.
Ash-veils purred, pillowed, flaked
blossom-like into plumes, touch-
papers, brocades, svelte pot-pourri.

An aerosol tossed in from darkness
sent up punctual whumphs, ruining
orders of fire-colour into a knee-high
vortex of black-ash, irking embers
back into flame, scoffing Guy-Fawkes,

with his ball-in-sock head crowned
in Catherine-wheels, - he fizzed. But
what caught my eye was a vague man,
sidestepping behind our garden's

shrub-border, gnawing his top lip,
clapping with the backs of his hands,
going still to gasp in the night-air,
shudder rigid, then point fiercely at me.

Birdwatching from Church Island

By a marble tomb I sat
watching high gulls fall
and rise quite low over

the blue Menai waters.
A cormorant vanished
into the wide glow of

the crouched sun, then
burst through the other
side unscathed, shining.

Amy walked with our
dogs among the graves,
calling out the dates of

those who died young at
sea until I heard her no
more above the wind,

but I still could hear the
greenshank's shriek,
and the patter of dusk's

dark rain on rocks and
cemetery trees. I would've
given my heart away if I

knew where it was, and
there was no more light to
search and search for it by.

Dockland

Derricks swing round with cargo,
their arcing shadows run.
Between hull and harbour wall
brown waters flop and slap.

I am waiting on the dock
for my father who is
in the ship trading chrome rods,
scrap pistons, copper rads,

bronze propellers worn blunt by
shredding seas, pipes twisted
by ghosts of the Bering sea,
engines clapped out by ice.

He has been gone for cold hours.
What is to stop the ship
from hauling anchor, snap free
with cleat-bound ropes attached?

Poltergeists are on the loose,
driving the north-west wind
into a frenzy. The dock
is empty, quiet, dark.

Three Herons in a Day

I

As old men we will stalk springbok through the bush,
gather snake-skins to decorate the entrance
into our hive-shaped mud-hut, recite ancestral
African verses to the sounds of jackals mating outside.
We will invent a way to tell the time by desert winds.

II

As a I child I will meet you sharing a stone coffin
with your best friend in Kirstall Abbey,
playing truant from school and laughing
about life and death in the cloisters.
Frightened, I will go and play down by the river.

III

Shaken awake from my midnight sleepwalk
I swayed on the top-stair like a reed on a cliff-edge.
From the dark water below a jackdaw emerged
with a piece of paper saying your maiden name
tied with a string of blood around its neck.
We reached out to catch it. We fell awake in bed.

IV

Eavesdropping through a crack in the door
on your Sunday morning conversation
I heard one of you whisper to the other
that I am a snowfall in Eden that cannot thaw.

V

Even though you shot my eagle
with a sawn off shot gun
our mother didn't seem to care.
Her only words of wisdom were-
'remember to clean up the mess.'

VI

I have never seen three herons in a day,
or the darkness beneath my skin,
myself asleep, a comet's blazing trail,
my brother's blood, an original music score.

Mother, Father, why do you give so much to me?

Arias

1. *Age and Peace*

Your hands, guarding my grave from snowfall
shook under the gathering weight of snow
until bringing my warm head beneath them
they rested and we waited for the thaw.

2. *Request*

I heard my mother when she was a child
asking her mother how many flowers
she was allowed to take from the garden
to put in my hair when I am a child.

3. *Responsibilities*

A cormorant drying its wings welcomed
you father into an aqua-air world
but the path you were walking on lead back
home- a fire dying, rooms black and cold.

4. *Touch*

Photographs pinned to a tree of grey ash
along with childhood's laundry and homework.
This time around the wild phoenix is born
as items approved by my mother's touch.

5. *Amy*

From a case in the attic she found laces
of rainbow to tie around her ankles and wrists.
Now nobody, not even dogs and friends
can find, though they see her, where she begins.

6. *Poetry*

From behind the apple-blossom tree
I watched you pray beside the garden wall
and I hated the wind because it was louder
than what you were trying to say.

7. *The Dance*

A father forgetting that he once danced
with his child remembers her again
while walking in near home woods
he sees a red leaf rise, and not fall.

8. *The Measure*

Now you are not here I think of one leaf
safe from the snow beneath a robin's tail-
when he flies I will rush to bring to mind
all the warm light I know.

9. *The Emblem*

A Hawk hovered above a bonfire.
Next morning, in the ashes,
I found its cooling skull. It was mine.

Kingfisher

From cold cruel waters,
the cobalt coil of the kingfisher
springs up with her catch,

throttling low over pools too slow
to reflect her blue
and belly of amber gem gold,

darting down streets crowded with birds
silly-drunk with jealousy,

through cities of sky-scraping reeds
blown back
quaking by the silent,
Chinook-thrumming of her wings.

She flies as though pursued,
in fear of being mugged.

Whipping, dabbing and dodging,
shocking the heron from his deep
midday meditation.

She alights, shakes out icicle light
the bouncing moon of the egret
borrows for his brightness,

and the curlew is inspired by to shoot
mud stars into the night's canvas
from the bow of his bill,

and the sea, a distant admirer
of her sapphire breathing
rumoured abroad to be in town
by the gossiping gulls,
approaches in slow and excited tides
to witness her sleeping.

Each wave takes turns to hold,
nurse and freshen her from afar.
Her colours need dream-time to repair.

And then, suddenly, she will wake, break
through the gawking awestruck world,

catching everything off guard,
even the policing clouds,

except for the morning sun
that has waited all night to throw upon her

a sparkling new dress
to coil down into cold cruel waters,

to seduce and kiss a catch
disguised as a brooch
in the summer sky of her hair.

One Right Thought Away

Listening to lapwings in the dark,
streams of geese overhead swerve
toward a distant island where I should be
in commune with a different night,
another life in a different dark where stars
are a local passion, wind-racing a sport.
In dreams, in imagination, I go there
but that is not enough. It is only
one right thought away. The geese haven't
got there yet, the lapwings rise and fall.

The Hut

Recall the collapsing nissen-hut
dressed in drapes of slack army canvas
and tarpaulin that billowed in the wind.

Badger's carcase glimmered inside,
flensed roe-bone amongst springs,
rusted parts of a butcher's bike,

topped vats crammed with mulch,
one fox glove hanging lamp-like
from the flakey asbestos dome

by a cobwebby thread of elastic string.
A hesitant breath then you broke in,
leaving me outside to guard the door

from figures swaying through the dusk.
I was almost somnolent until
you burst out past me on a bike

with a bleached skull for a seat,
puckered wheels hinged around
spokes of rib, a lazily working

chain oiled by an animal's remnants
of synovial fluid and blood,
wheeling toward home, wailing in hope

for a fire preparing to be lit,
your grin of fraternal abandon
enhanced by pigeon-gut flecked

across your smug and glowing cheek,
a nugget of jaw lodged like a keepsake
in your bottom blazer pocket.

A search party was sent out for me
through enthralling angles of starlit rain.
I was where I was; you were nowhere to be seen.

For You I Think

For you, Mother, I think back to the guillemot
I failed to save on the shingle beach
from choking in a cape of rope and oil
on New Year's Day-

For you, Brother, I think back to the osprey
on the coast of Maine so broad winged
he blocked out my basking in the sun
upon Atlantic rock-

For you, Father, I think back to the scales
we fixed to weigh in semi-precious scrap
beneath a full moon surrounded by three rings
of starry-white mist-

For myself, I think back to the chandelier of blood
flowing in a bucket from a headless
punch-bag of pig hooked up by its trotters
to the roof of a hut.

Across From Here

From my dark garden
I look across
unknown acres
at a dimly-lit porch
with two doors.

The brown door leads
into a house
where one man lies
curled up in the corner
of a slum room.

A pair of threadbare wings
hang down on twine
from rafters,
twirling ragged silhouettes
around peeling walls.

The white door leads through
to an orchard
with a glowing blossom tree
of ice-blue light
at its centre
where I am sat down beneath,
settled for all time.

