

R.S. Thomas and Localism: the True Wales of his Imagination and Cultural Landscapes

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INTRODUCTION

As a priest-poet of the post-industrial and post-war period, Thomas represents Wales through bleak, decaying hill farms and a dying Welsh culture. His representation of the natural environment is closely and ambivalently connected with historical and cultural dynamism as a way to criticise social transformations brought about by modernity. However, I argue that the Welsh landscape for Thomas is a pre-eminent product of his poetic imagination and a cultural act of creating an environment. For Thomas, writing poetry is affiliated with the poet's political stance: localism. Thomas' landscape of bare hill farms, a poor peasant, and a depopulated community reflects the poet's nationalist propaganda and invokes a revival of agrarian culture. The constructed landscape resists capitalism, which threatens Welsh rural ways of life. However, the depiction of transformed Wales offers scrutiny in poetic creativity, since it is overwhelmed with contradictions, inwardly and outwardly. Thomas' organic metaphor of earth and man or man and tree and his personal accounts sometimes

romanticise Wales, yet, at their core, encapsulate an anti-pastoral tone.

In this paper, I explore the poet's conflicted identities reflected in his poetry and his thoughts on landscapes. I argue that Thomas' paradoxical representation of a problematic Wales is a product of his poetic imagination that incorporates his nationalist politics. The first section examines Denis E. Cosgrove's concept of landscape as an act of cultural creativity in which a poet holds the power of seeing, shaping, and creating the external environment as a combination of his imagination and perception of actual places. After that, I draw on Heidegger's notion of language as a means to transform the world in connection with Charles Taylor's study. With Matthew Jarvis' analysis of the Welsh environment in poetry and his examination of a controversial argument by Bryan Griffiths on Thomas' bleak landscape, I elaborate on the imagined landscapes of Wales re-shaped and re-presented with opposed cultural and political perspectives. These concepts are most clearly seen in the characterisation of the peasant, Iago Prytherch. Prytherch

is a significant and influential creation; his character embeds within a conflicted archetype of a Welsh farmer who reflects the strong connection/resistance between landscapes and human communities. Towards the end of this study, I will discuss the ecological metaphors of earth, land, trees, and other fundamental elements as the body of constructed Welsh environments that reveal the (dis) continuity of history, the negotiation of local cultural identity, and the interconnectedness of humans and the natural environment.

Landscape, representation, and poetic language

To begin with, the idea of landscape is a way of seeing the world, and it is an imprecise and ambiguous concept, which is not merely confined to the world we see. Rather, "it is a construction, a composition of the world" (Cosgrove, 1998, p. 13). The idea of landscape constitutes a cultural discourse through which social groups identify and frame themselves and the land, which leads to the connection between human history and natural history. If the landscape is a symbolic construction that combines a sense of place and belonging created by the landscape observer or geographer, then s/he has the power to shape, imagine, and interpret the representation of that physical space. Cosgrove states that "[a]ny sensitivity to the history of landscape and its representations in the Western tradition forces the recognition that human history is one of constant

environmental modification, manipulation, destruction and creation, both material and imaginative." (p. xxix)

The history of landscape and humans is a source of endless discussion environmentally. However, the focus of this study lies in the imaginative interpretations of landscapes that allow a poet to represent his imagined environments in order to negotiate with his personal identity as much as cultural and political propaganda. Thomas' poetic imagery of bare hill farms will be analysed to demonstrate his environmental imagination in relation to Welsh history, culture, and society. The close interconnectedness between the symbolic language of poetry and the transformations of external nature, including human communities; farmlands; and the non-dwelling environments such as bare hills, rivers, woods, and pastoral spaces, can be critically discussed with Heidegger's idea of language and ecology.

In "Heidegger, Language and Ecology" (1992), by delineating the constitutive view of language as an "enframing" instrument, Charles Taylor contends that, in a Heideggerian sense, language transforms the world in which humans are involved and all the things they incorporate meanings for themselves (p. 252). Taylor pursues his arguments that "[l]anguage introduces new meanings in our world: the things that surround us become potential bearers of properties; they can have new emotional significance for us, e.g., as objects of admiration or indignation" (p. 252)

Language has a creative dimension of expression, which involves speech and an interlocutor. Therefore, constitutive language goes beyond the descriptive to the symbolic, particularly in art and poetry. Although Taylor agrees that language discloses meaning in the enframing theory, he argues that Heidegger does not see the idea of language as our power to reveal what is subjective in its rationale (p. 257). In fact, language is enframed to perform a set of functions and opens access to meaning. This access can be regarded as “clearing” a space of expression, which suggests a mode of representation (Taylor, p. 260). According to Taylor’s consideration of Heidegger, R.S. Thomas’ rhetorical landscape is a product of the critical construction of symbolic language, which opens access to making and reinterpreting the natural landscape of Wales. His success in creating this imagined space results in the readership of Welsh poetry in English, which informs the negotiation of cultural identity and political domination in Wales.

In “...Poetically Man Dwell...”, Martin Heidegger (2001) believes that through the concept of dwelling, man creates poetry in a sense of building (meanings and ideas); nevertheless, he states that “[m]an acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man” (p. 213). This line of thought, in which language has the power to transform things, leaves a gap between a person who uses the language and the constitutive

role of the language itself, in which man negotiates his agenda in poetry. For example, Thomas’ mother tongue (English) plays a significant role as an instrument to express thoughts in his poetry, even though the poet started to learn Welsh as an adult. However, his subsequent acquisition of Welsh as an adult does not effectively allow him to present his cultural scheme. English encapsulates social and political propaganda and reaches a wider readership, while the Welsh language crucially frames his politics of culture and thoughts, but fails to construct his poetic identity. Therefore, I argue that, for Thomas, Welsh is the master of man in a Heideggerian sense, which drives Thomas to promote his cultural revival. Welsh is the language that masters his thoughts and the landscape, but English is the language that he himself can master. The poetics of making the imaginative landscape is both subjective, in his English affinity, and objective, in his Welsh endeavour. Thomas’ landscape of the mind is arguably enframed in the readers’ imagination, which manifests the acceptance of the poet’s politics of place. To appropriate Heidegger’s concept of language as revealing and its power to transform the world, Thomas’ poetic language influentially re-creates and changes the images of Welsh landscape in the public understanding through the mode of representation. If language and ecology are the main subjects of Thomas’ poetic representation, then the poet is critically engaged with permitting these two entities to

perform their functions in reviving Welsh cultural identity through the construction of the external environment. In many significant poems, such as 'A Peasant', 'A Priest to His People', 'Welsh Landscape', 'Welsh History', 'The Trees (Owain Glyn Dwr Speaks)', etc., the construction of Wales as a symbolic landscape is significantly connected with political affiliation, which cannot be denied in Thomas' construction of Welshness. According to the triangular relationship between poetic identity, literary culture, and the imagination of landscapes, Linden Peach (1998) argues that "Welsh writing in English is closely complicated in the cultural construction of Welsh environments because specific contexts give the writing cultural relevance and it is important to recognise the authenticity of these contexts" (p. 195). The poet can create the landscapes through his writing by focusing on the particular contexts, especially in Thomas' depiction of bare hill farms and a poor, alienated Welsh peasant. In the same way, referring to Lawrence Buell, Matthew Jarvis (2008) contends that landscape is an act of culture (p. 10). For Jarvis, "each act of writing the environment is, at its core, an argument about how the world should be seen: it is nothing less than an invitation to understand, to approach the world in a particular way" (p. 11). This argument is connected to Cosgrove's notion of landscape as an act of creation to see, interpret, and shape external nature. In this study, the act of writing nature lies in how

Thomas creates his imaginative Welsh landscapes.

By questioning the idea of authenticity, R.S. Thomas, in his poetry, reconstructs Welsh landscapes out of his conflicted personal identity encapsulated in a patriotic, political, and cultural agenda. The representation of harsh and bitter Welsh hill farms and the characterisation of a Welsh hill farmer, Iago Prytherch, are ambiguous products of his middle-class perspective, which ambivalently creates an environmental imagination and a sense of belonging. The contradiction of the poet's upbringing in the English language and education leads to anxiety in his cultural identity. In "The Creative Writer's Suicide", Thomas addresses the role of a Welsh poet and his conflicted identity that shape his way of thinking and poetic creativity. Language is a means of expression to negotiate his connection with the two cultures. Thomas wrote that:

An Anglo-Welsh writer is neither one thing nor the other. He subsists in no-man's-land between two cultures. For various reasons, he has to write in English. So, whatever is said to the contrary, he is contributing to English culture, and deserves the rebuke of his fellow Welshmen on that account. (Thomas, 1997, p. 22)

The *inbetweenness* that Thomas refers to paradoxically implies a sense of belonging and detachment. Thomas believes that the Welsh poet's role to revive Welsh culture, history, and

tradition is connected with his understanding and manipulation of the English language so that he does not undermine Welsh culture. Thomas uses this opportunity to write in English, not to “commit suicide” because of his duty to Welsh culture while losing his aesthetic inspiration as a poet, but to negotiate with English cultural domination by opening a channel to a wider readership. The internal conflict permits Thomas to explore his identity as well as to perform a poet’s duty to his rooted culture.

Thomas’ relocation from Liverpool to Holyhead and Manafon paves the way for his search for ecological and poetic identity. In *No-One*, Thomas confesses that the rural community is a stepping-stone to his understanding of Welsh farming life. He describes:

From trying to understand the countryman in Manafon as a man, and making him a symbol of the relationship that existed between man and the earth in the contemporary world of the machine, he turned to taking an interest in the history of Wales, her political and social problems, and his own situation as a Welshman who had to respond and write in English because of his upbringing. (Thomas, 1997, p. 55)

It is from a middle-class perspective that Thomas sees the hardship and bitterness in Welsh farmland, where machine culture is encroaching on the countryside. As the poet started

his career as a priest in Chirk, he set out to learn Welsh in order to return to “the true Wales of my (his) imagination” (Thomas, 1997, p. 10). It is the desire to remake Wales through a metaphorical language, which drives the poet to conduct his search for cultural and poetic identity. The poet’s obvious devotion to and passion for Welsh culture creates anxiety and causes a conflict in negotiating his revival of the declining heritage that he feels the need to save from extinction.

Iago Prytherch: a prototype of a poor welsh farmer

Thomas’ perception of Wales is significantly romanticised in his recounting of the myth of Wales; “Westwards the sky would ablaze, reminding one of the battles of the past. Against that radiance the hills rose dark and threatening as if full of armed men waiting for a chance to attack. To the west, therefore, there was a romantic, dangerous, mysterious land” (Thomas, 1997, p. 10). The following account clearly uncovers Thomas’ paradoxical identity and sense of place as he moved to Manafon:

Manafon was an eye-opener to me. Here I became aware of the clash between dream and reality. I was a proper little bourgeois, brought up delicately, with the mark of the church and the library on me. I had seen this part of the country from the train in the evening through a romantic haze. I now found myself amongst hard,

materialist, industrious people, who measured each other in acres and pounds; Welshmen who turned their backs on their inheritance, buying and selling in Welshpool, Oswestry and Shrewsbury; farmers of the cold, bare hillsides, who dreamed of saving money to move to a more fertile farm on the plains. (Thomas, 1997, p. 10)

Manafon influentially fosters in Thomas a sense of otherness, which alienates him from the Welsh community. Thomas creates the enclosed Welsh farming community; “[i]n an important sense, certainly in our time, he created Manafon. But he is not claiming, egotistically, to have put Manafon ‘on the map’” (Jason W. Davies, 1997, p. xxxiii). Thomas’ identity and his conception of the country can be read closely in his poetry that suggests problematic dimensions in the Welsh hill farms and the characterisation of the peasant figure. In the most anthologised poem, ‘A Peasant’ in *The Stones of the Field* (1946), Thomas creates Iago Prytherch to represent Welsh hill farmers who suffer from hard work and the poor landscape. Prytherch is depicted as an archetypal figure of Welsh countrymen deprived of culture and alienated from fertility in the physical environment:

*Just ordinary man of the bald
Welsh hills,
Who pens a few sheep in a gap
of the cloud.
Docking mangels, chipping in the*

green skin

*From the yellow bones with a
half-witted grin
Of satisfaction, or churning the
crude earth (2-6)*

Thomas generalises a common Welsh peasant closely connected with the poor farmland (‘bald’) where only a few livestock are described. Similarly, the weather, in which the wind and “the sun that cracks the cheeks of the gaunt sky” (9-10), is harsh and emblematic. To emphasise Welsh peasantry in relation to cultural decline, the poet critiques a sense of displacement and tension in the farmer who carries on this ancestral hard work. Farming unites him with the earth; yet, it alienates him from the futile motherland. Notably, the symbol of “bones”, which refers to the human body, suggests the burden in farm work – “churning the crude earth”. In so doing, the farmer’s body is integrated with the body of the land embedded with responsibility. The bare farm illustrates the simplicity of rural life; however, there is a sense of patronising and otherness by the poet. “[A] half-witted grin of satisfaction” does not only imply lack of education but also refers to harsh farm life that Prytherch cannot reject, and is forced to accept. Thomas’ creation of Prytherch’s physical appearance also enhances the construction of this pathetic character as he is docking mangels and chipping in “the green skin from the yellow bone”. Therefore, the integrity of the human body and the body of the earth is indicative of

Thomas' ecological identity and the organic metaphor, which addresses his environmental consciousness.

To make a stark contrast between the backward peasantry in Wales and the modern, materialist influence from the outside world, Thomas creates Prytherch with wild, natural, and rustic orientations. Prytherch is connected to organic elements, such as the earth, plough lands, animals, plants, wind, rain, etc. This anti-pastoral depiction shapes the character of the poor farmer unpolluted by urban influence and imprints the image of being *natural*, for which nostalgic readers yearn. In the second section, Thomas presents Prytherch:

His clothes, sour with years of sweat

And animal contact, shock the refined,

But affected, sense with their stark naturalness.

Yet this is your prototype, who, season by season

Against siege of rain and the wind's attrition,

Preserves his stock, an impregnable fortress

Not to be stormed even in death's confusion. (14-19)

As a "prototype" of a farmer in Manafon, Prytherch is a successful representation of the down-to-earth peasant whose affinity with the wild is refigured by his contact with animals through hard work and confined to a rustic, primitive way of life. Yet, the emphasis on the "stark naturalness"

of the refined strongly connotes the bourgeois perspective, which offers the opposite view of peasantry in a romantic image: the farmer, close to nature in his *unity with wind and rain*. On the other hand, the idea of "naturalness" might evoke scrutiny in nature as an object of appreciation in an aesthetic and problematic sense. By making the farmer tolerant of the "siege of rain and the wind's attrition" throughout the seasons, the poet unconsciously suggests the rural character's ability to resist the futile landscape as well as to be shaped by the environment.

In order to understand the conflicted identity of the poet and his characterisation of the peasant, it is helpful to view Prytherch as Thomas' mouthpiece by which he draws attention to the problematic situation of Welsh agrarian culture. Yet, Thomas' spokesman seems to present contradictions; Prytherch's predicament is not merely a symbol of Thomas' concern for the decline of Welsh rural community, but he is also a strike back against English cultural hegemony in Wales. Thomas' internal struggle and his created figure can be discussed in a psychological relation with social and cultural dimensions. R.G. Thomas (1970) argues that:

The plight of Iago is the plight of the decaying depopulated Welsh hillside farms; he is an uncertain repository of a way of life that, stated explicitly in political terms, could become the cradle of an enduring Welsh way of life which, the poet

believes, should be maintained and extended against the false values of an invading English culture. In some subtle way Iago has become part of the poet's mind, an alter ego: the peasant is tied to his soil and animals; the priest is tied to his faith and his parishioners; the poet is anchored to his craft and cannot let go. (Anstey, p. 42.)

Prytherch, as an alter ego of the poet, is an internalised analogy that connects the complexity of language and ecology. The contradictory depiction of the Welsh peasant is oriented towards bitterness and hardship while Thomas' portrayal of Wales is sometimes romanticised. Prytherch's "naturalness" can be interpreted as a cultural construction based on the English preconception of Welsh farm life. At the end of the poem, Thomas significantly creates a strong relation between Prytherch and the environment, as the farmer is projected as "Enduring like a tree under the curious stars" (22). Although the agrarian nationalist figure often portrays the Welsh farm with barrenness and tension, "A Peasant" leaves the readers with the positive image of an enduring tree, suggesting growth and continuity.

Thomas' environmental imagination, which is ambivalently portrayed as bleak, harsh, and hopeless, is reconstructed out of his pessimistic vision of the landscape interwoven with political propaganda. As a nationalist priest-poet who battles with English influences in Wales, politically and

culturally, Thomas' poetry reflects his projection of the barrenness and depopulation of the Welsh landscapes; this imagery results from the influence of English culture and modern development. The negative representation of Welsh environments can be regarded as a "landscape rhetoric" (Jarvis, p. 24) created to wrestle with cultural domination from English discourse of modern urbanisation. Therefore, the patriotic strategy that Thomas deploys is to re-imagine Wales, which is in decline, physically and culturally. However, Bryn Griffiths, a later generation Welsh poet (Jarvis, p. 22), objects, seeing Thomas' depiction of Wales rather biased and too negative. In 'Note for R.S. Thomas', Griffiths obviously attacks Thomas for his unfair judgment of presenting Wales as a locus of decay. In contrast, Griffiths shows Wales in a pastoral image:

*Come down, Mr. Thomas, from
your austere perch,*

*The imposed rigour of thought,
your stern pulpit.*

*Take back your bleak sermons on
us:*

*The stone desert in the peasant's
mind, decay,*

*The dead hearts in the mountain
flowers.*

Griffiths invokes his disagreement with Thomas' obsession with bleakness and decay in Welsh landscapes due to his affinity for Christianity, the religion that fetters Thomas' perspective to the idea of redemption. By identifying Thomas with his stern

stance and austere position, Griffith invites the poet to open his mind to appreciate the beauty of Wales, the other side of the bare hill farms not included in Thomas' work. Griffith's objection against Thomas is mainly based on his affinity with religion that binds him to the grim imagery. As Jarvis (p. 23) furthers this dialogue, Griffith's poem about Wales, in fact, renders a romanticised image of the countryside as a place of domestication as he describes:

*Beside the granite uplands, the
arid plateaus
Of an old despair, there remain
the green valleys,
The bright chambers of changeless
air.*

The description of the green valleys and bright chambers of the environment highlights the positive and romanticised landscapes that Griffiths thinks Thomas omits in his poetry. Griffiths presents the landscape as pastoralised and habitable in opposition to Thomas' bleak, anti-pastoral depiction. Nevertheless, Jarvis (2008, p. 23) concludes that Griffiths' rejection of Thomas' rhetorical landscape is his attempt to "render Welsh space as domesticated, as tamed, and thus to claim it as inherently civilized; he is offended, in other words, by what he sees as Thomas' suggestion of the primitive in Welsh land". What these two poets attempt to create are alternative versions of Welsh landscapes that offer distinct perspectives with different political and cultural agen-

das. Thus, Griffiths' justification of Wales proves my key argument that the landscape is an act of construction and representation. Jarvis claims that Welsh landscape can be textually re-interpreted to reveal the complexity of environmental imagination and the power of constitutive language to change our perceptions. As a landscape of imagination, I interpret this critical poetic dialogue as a dichotomy between the anti-pastoral and the romantic mode in the Welsh landscapes. Both Griffiths and Thomas re-create Welsh landscapes from their distinctive poetic imagination.

Jeremy Hooker (2001), a Welsh critic, argues that Thomas' view of Wales when he was young is "self-confessedly a romantic one" (p. 28). For Hooker, in the myth of the West, Thomas' ambivalent attitude towards Wales is based on his sense of belonging and the sentiment of national culture. As a poet, Thomas uses poetry to negotiate the independence of thoughts and aesthetics, especially in landscapes. By drawing in natural imagery to tackle the cultural hegemony of England, Hooker concludes that

*This, surely, is, among other things,
Thomas's answer to his own nostalgia,
with its inclination to idealise a
pattern of Welsh rural life belonging
to the past; and, here, it is vision
that displaces the romantic dream,
depicting "the true Wales of my
imagination" as an object of striving
and longing, which is also an implicit
judgment upon every "second-hand
substitute". (Jarvis, 2001, p. 39)*

It is the conflicted image of Wales that reflects the poet's political strategy to emphasise Welsh identity in representing the environment. In Hooker's words, Thomas' poetry of landscape is a "second-hand substitute" derived from his quest for identity. His political and cultural affinity to revive Wales through problematic landscapes replaces his romantic idyll of Wales in the West.

Being wild under the roles of religion and nature

Thomas' conflicted concept of romantic Wales and the representation of the bleak, bare hills are made apparent in his criticism of the role of aesthetics and religion. The two elements are distinctive in the dichotomy of the wild, rural life and civilised, urban and educated living. "A Priest to His People" in *The Stones of the Field* (1946) and "Valediction" in *An Acre of Land* (1952) function reciprocally, creating a crucial dialogue between the priest-poet and local people in a Welsh rural community. Thomas reproaches country people for their ignorance and lack of art, education, and religion.

"A Priest to His People" opens with a reference to a close connection between Welsh people and their livestock, including "sheep", "pigs", and "ponies". Although there is a sense of humour when the priest addresses the farmers with their "sweaty females", the comparison between humans and domesticated animals is patronising and implies the deprivation of the farmer's conscience and ability to be

educated. The speaker is filled with discontent for the countrymen's ignorance in art and living without faith in the Church, as he says: "How I have hated your irreverence, your scorn even/ Of the refinements of art and the mysteries of the Church" (3-4). This accusation illustrates the alienation of the country people from the civilised role of education and religion to offer aesthetics and spiritual affinity in the Anglican Church. The turning point of the poem lies in the emphasis of nature, evident in wildness, which fetters rural people to ignorance and hypocrisy. To criticize the influence of the natural environment on farmers, Thomas describes the physical appearance of the churchgoers as coarse and rustic:

*Men of bone, wrenched from the
bitter moorland,*

*Who have not yet shaken the moss
from your savage skulls,*

*Or prayed the peat from your eyes,
(7-9)*

The depiction of the hill people with earthly elements, such as "moss" and "peat", on one hand, connotes simplicity in the physical appearance and the unity between man and nature. However, this description implies backwardness, ignorance, lack of education, and the inability to be taught intellectually and spiritually. The farmers are bound to be wild: "And all the devices of church and school/ Have failed to cripple your unhallowed movements,/ Or put a halter on your wild soul" (15-17). The

direct reference to a “wild soul” can arguably be interpreted as the natural force that shapes the mentality of the country people, their strong bond with nature, out of the control of education, and the role of art. More importantly, the failure of the Church to tame their *wildness* reflects the anxiety in the priest-poet, whose criticism of the country signifies the discrepancy between the backward associations with nature and the inability to accept cultural and educational influence.

Although the same reproach is critically made in ‘Valediction’, which articulates the poet’s disappointment in Welsh peasants’ intellectual and aesthetic ignorance, this poem paradoxically considers the optimistic role of nature in educating a human soul on earth. The focus on the romantic side of Welsh landscapes is contradictory to the condemnation of peasantry and harsh farm life in “A Priest to His People”. Thomas’ return to nature originates from a “hiraeth” or yearning for the past in the romantic Welsh country that paves the way for both expectation and disappointment. As the poem opens, the lighted hills in “wild beauty” (7) and “seas of dew” (9) are portrayed to justify Thomas’ sacramental vision in the external nature that the farmer fails to see. In “Valediction”, the fact that a farmer’s “uncouthness has no kinship with the earth” (15-16) suggests the rejection of nature in favour of modernity, which envisions the failure of Welsh cultural identity at large. Arguably, the poem is prominent in its paradoxical tone in the third stanza, when the

speaker condemns the farmer for his isolation from the environment.

*Unnatural and inhuman, your
wild ways*

*Are not sanctioned; you are con-
demned*

By man’s potential stature. (19-21)

The priest contradictorily claims that the farmer is “unnatural”, but his relationship with nature is “wild”, beyond the domestication of culture. The peasant is ambivalently put between being cultivated and growing wild, as he is “unnatural”; yet he is “inhuman” in the sense that he is deprived of the ability to be cultivated by religion and culture. It is notable that the poet ambiguously defines the idea of “potential” by drawing a connection to his ability to appreciate nature in an aesthetic sense. This is arguably grounded in the English middle-class mindset in which Thomas was raised. As the poem progresses, Thomas relatively suggests that the farmer open his heart to appreciate the beauty in the external environment as a way to obtain access to divine nature.

Two things

*That could redeem your igno-
rance, the beauty*

*And grace that trees and flowers
labour to teach.*

*Were never yours, you shut your
heart against them. (21-24)*

Thomas’ affinity with the Church is reflected in his representation of nature with a stern and didactic tone;

the redemption of “ignorance” is, therefore, a partial critique of man’s alienation from his environment. The appreciation of the romantic landscape seems to answer the problem of unity with external nature in the beauty of flora and fauna. This new union, which differs from the harsh, bitter union described in “Valediction”, facilitates the farmer gaining his understanding of the world. To connect Thomas with Heidegger, the farmer can dwell poetically on the earth, which is contradictory to the peasant Prytherch, who suffers from the harsh and hostile farmland.

Return to nature is a sacramental vision that heals the displacement of man from his true dwelling, in a sense of place and living in nature. Thomas’ illustration of the sound of the birds and the beauty of trees and flowers is an attempt to justify his criticism of the countrymen and his call for them to return to the environment. This responds to an escape from the lack of knowledge and artistic values and to achieve his humanist potential. Towards the end of the poem, the poetic speaker leaves the farmer discontented. Devotion to hard farm works cannot answer his lack of spiritual integrity: “For this I leave you/ Alone in your harsh acre, herding pennies” (30-31). The repeated claim that modern materialism deprives the farmer of an appreciation and understanding of nature recurs throughout many collections. I argue that Thomas constructs the Welsh landscape of rhetoric out of his imagination, and it paradoxically sways from the an-

ti-pastoral to the romantic. “A Priest to His People” and “Valediction” share the contradictory representations of nature that are closely affiliated with the Welsh rural environment. While Thomas’ imagination of “wild” peasantry hinders the farmer from being civilised in “A Priest to His People”, the return to nature, not in the commercial farming context but to true, natural beauty, might be the answer to keeping countrymen away from ignorance.

The past foresees the future

The representation of the Welsh landscape, in relation to the land and the past, reveals the stories of the earth in national history. Thomas imagines the Welsh landscapes by rewriting the history of the earth and the trees with a sense of anger and bitterness due to the decline of Welsh culture. Through the metaphor of the soil, Thomas revives the stories of the land to critique the (dis)continuity of history, the interactions of man and his place in nature. Also, the poet considers the transformed perception of Wales and the inevitable politics of cultural hegemony. In “Welsh History” in *An Acre of Land* (1952), the poet manifests the delineation of the temporal dimension in which a battle is encapsulated with loss and decline. The Welsh landscape plays an important role as the backdrop for its social and political transformations. Though the environment helps protect the Welsh territory from its invaders, it is prone to defeat. There is a sense of mystery in the landscape, “the stranger/ nev-

er found our ultimate stand/ in the thick woods” (7-9). Thomas connects the history of battle and death with the Welsh landscape to address its enduring complexity and inform the interconnectedness to ecology, as:

*We were a people bred on legends,
Warming our hands at the red
past.*

*The great were ashamed of our
loose rags*

*Clinging stubbornly to the proud
tree*

*Of blood and birth, our lean
bellies*

*And mud houses were a proof
Of our ineptitude for life. (15-21)*

Thomas writes the past in connection to history of war, in which the tree symbolises the continuity of fighting spirit, royalty, and birth. While the farmer is associated with “yellow” to connote futility and hardship in farm works in “A Peasant”, it is “red” that implicates nationalist propaganda and the continuity of Wales in “Welsh History”. However, Thomas emphatically points out that the simplicity of folk life also contributes to the grand narrative of Welsh history: “mud houses were proof of our ineptitude for life”. “Welsh History” is presented with unity between the making of the nation as a resistance against invasion from “foreign” power and the struggle of the people and landscapes that bore blood in the rise and fall of the old Welsh kingdom. The tree of “blood and birth” and the “mud houses” are organic and symbolic images of the

earth that retells the historical account in Wales. The role of history and sense of place is worth considering in relation to Thomas’ contemplation of the landscape to enhance his patriotic propaganda.

In “Welsh Landscape”, one of Thomas’ masterpieces, the idea of landscape as a reflection of social and cultural transformations prevails throughout the poem. Not being able to resist the influx of modern development and urbanisation as a global phenomenon, which gradually changes rural Wales, Thomas emphasises the environment historically influenced by those changes. He projects the Welsh landscape with integrity of both the physical and temporal space.

*To live in Wales is to be conscious
At dusk of the spilled blood
That went to the making of the
wild sky,*

*Dyeing the immaculate rivers
In all their courses. (1-5)*

The image of blood dyeing the river red is very graphic and prominently grounded in the idea of history and the making of the nation. Here, political messages are strongly bound up with Thomas’ ecological agenda; as in “Welsh History”, Thomas uses “red” to invoke Welsh forefathers pursuing the idea of nationalism through sacrifice and glory via the imagery of sky, rivers, and the earth. The poem is successful in creating the landscape of a battlefield to highlight the war history by provoking readers’ consciousness of the loss and devotion that

came about through the building of the nation. The natural entities reflect the impact of politics in re-imagining the external environment: “making the wild sky/ dyeing the immaculate rivers”. Thomas’ rewritten history constructs the Welsh landscape to enhance his nationalist message, in which nature and human history are closely interconnected. The last section of “Welsh Landscape” internalises the complexity of Thomas’ opinion toward Welsh socio-cultural decline suggested in the ruins:

*There is no present in Wales,
And no future;
There is only the past,
Brittle with relics,
Wind-bitten towers and castles
With sham ghosts;
Mouldering quarries and mines;
And an impotent people,
Sick with inbreeding,
Worrying the carcase of the old
song. (20-29)*

These lines summarise Thomas’ projection of the physical space and the temporal space in Welsh history, encapsulated in the old ruins of towers and castles. This depiction is similar to a ghost that haunts its people, yet cannot incite them to any changes: politically and culturally. By pointing out the hopeless present situation of Wales in comparison with the remnants of the past, such as “quarries and mines”, Thomas ecologically critiques the physical impact of the Industrial Revolution on the environment, in line with the deterioration of society

and culture. The past, “brittle with relics”, seems to foreshadow the similar situation of Welsh society, as the poet criticises the people and their cultural disintegration, perceived in the “carcase of the old song”. This significantly illustrates the poet’s concern for lost heritage, yet also foreshadows a similar future for the “impotent people”. The dichotomy of time and space – incorporated with the representation of Welsh landscape and history, despair and condemnation – is indicative of Thomas’ powerful craftsmanship in creating a language to write the place of his perception.

Environmental imagination: being Welsh in the earth and trees

To balance the politics of Welsh landscapes and his engagement with social and historical dynamism, I will show Thomas’ ecological consciousness in the organic metaphor of the earth and trees apparent in many collections. Thomas’ depiction of the earth or soil in the farmland is subtly preoccupied with the idea that the body of Welsh farming culture constitutes the construction of Welsh cultural identity. For his nationalist campaign, Thomas represents Wales through problematic imagery, as he creates the body of the landscape out of resentment and disparagement. Thomas perceives being Welsh as a solid identity associated with both backwardness and decay. He affiliates Welsh identity with the Welsh landscape, tangible material in which soil plays an important role in forming the poet’s identity. In “Welsh”, The

Bread of Truth (1963), the speaker, by implication Thomas, is made of the foundational element of the land.

*I'm Welsh, see:
A real Cymro,
Peat in my veins.
I was born late;
She claimed me,
Brought up me nice,
No hardship; (2-8)*

The use of the linguistic root, “cymro”/’kʌm.ri/, which means Welsh, reinforces the identity of the poet and the nation. His identification with the organic element, “peat” is similar to Prytherch, who is made of the “yellow bone” of the “crude earth” in “A Peasant”. Thomas’ “cymrification” of Wales initiates the expression of the country and the rural spirit in his poetry (Westover, 2011, p. 34); Welshness is refashioned in the eco-poetics of the earth. More significantly, the ecological reference to “peat” is especially specific, as “peat” is an essential element in agricultural landscapes, and this suggests a sense of unity between man and earth. However, Thomas’ view of the soil or peat is ambivalent. While his association of the peat in “The Priest to His People” is embedded with ignorance and coarseness, the peat in “Welsh” is connected with the cultural identity of the Welsh agrarian heritage. The “peat” in this light is a metaphor for a farmer’s blood, which circulates and stimulates his Welsh body. From the poem, Wales has brought up the narrator with no hardship; yet, his

animosity against his motherland is preoccupied with its declining culture, especially the Welsh language, which is lost to the English. The last stanza reflects this anger:

*I want the town even,
The door open
Framing a slut,
So she can speak Welsh
And bear children
To accuse the womb
That bore me. (30-36)*

The introduction to town epitomises the disparity between the city and country in that Thomas crucially criticises urbanisation that pollutes the rural, mentally and physically. The “slut” is symbolically linked with the city’s corruption, as in William Wordsworth’s “Michael: A Pastoral” (1800). In a conservative view that rejects modernity, “Welsh” affirms Thomas’ bitterness and hostility to the political and cultural hegemony of England in Wales. By comparing the land with a “slut”, the withering denunciation is controversial and directed at the land, which speaks to his existence, as much as his conflicted identity. To propose his sardonic desire to have a slut bear children who can speak Welsh, Thomas directly criticises Wales and desires “to accuse the womb/ That bore me”. Again, he compares the land to a “womb” that procreates Welshmen, although it is seen as “cramped”. Thomas juxtaposes his representation of Wales as the country that bore the poet and the “slut” who regenerates Welsh

children of the future to emphasise his love-hate relationship towards his motherland. The Welsh landscape is both beloved and disparaged, due to its decaying culture. The act of writing the land as a negotiation of personal and national identity is deemed a cultural act of re-defining Welshness.

The disparagement of external nature as a criticism of social decline is efficiently addressed in Thomas' consideration of the earth, which creates a sense of belonging and alienation. "Those Others" in *Tares* (1961) develops a similar criticism of Welsh society in relation to the landscape that bore the poet and peasants alike. The symbolic landscape of Wales is ambiguous, since the poet cannot pinpoint his identity to any specific place, given his relocations from priesthood to late life. Moreover, as an outsider in the Welsh communities, Thomas expresses his sense of otherness in the conception of the land:

*I have looked long at this land,
Trying to understand
My place in it – why,
With each fertile country
So free of its room,
This was the cramped womb
(1-6)*

The question of one's place in a specific location might be ambiguous in the discussion of identity. Thomas' primary education in the English language helps him to refashion himself as a Welsh man to fit in this context. Although the poet does not refer to the Welsh landscape as a hostile

farmland with bitterness, as he did in previous poems, the repeated disparagement of the land as a futile entity is still problematic in Thomas' bleak expression of the psychological space. The "cramped womb", which can be read as the land, cannot create a new paradigm of perception for the poet, but instead enhances hatred in its dwellers regarding cultural decline. In "The Cost of Strangeness", Anthony Conran argues that "there are many vulgar depictions of the feminine in Thomas' vocabulary but his sensitivity underplays the modernist sarcasm of Thomas' symbolist slut" (Heys, 2004, p. 311). The land in "Those others" is sarcastically generalised as Wales: a contradictory space and a contested site of politics and culture. Wales is specifically referred to as the farmland or the earth that nurtures and procreates lives and fertility in other poems. Here, the problematic land and the "womb" are juxtaposed to imply the unproductive quality in the body of the earth that creates tension in the political paradigm with a cynical tone. Being Welsh is an inconvenience that the poet cannot escape; yet, he turns his resentment and bitterness into an effective means to achieve his nationalist agenda and wrestle with the English culture.

In terms of social and political dimensions, Thomas uses the tree/man metaphor to symbolise his understanding of the continuity of Welshness through recognizing its decline as a way to trace the origin of the land and human history. If modern Welsh history is mainly con-

nected with English history since the sixteenth century, Thomas, in “The Tree (Owain Glyn Dwr Speaks)” in *An Acre of Land*, rewrites the last Welsh kingdom before its fall to bring back the patriotic ideology, of sacrifice and glory in the Welsh nation. Growth and decline are delineated to chronicle the story of the country through the narrative of Owain Glyn Dwr, the last Prince of Wales. Thomas creates Owain Glyn Dwr as a mouthpiece to recall courtly life, followed by oppression by the English, the prince’s birth and the omen, all of which signify the fall of the kingdom. As the narrative continues, an apocalyptic image of the Welsh nation is portrayed in the vision of a great tree growing out of fire. The symbolic tree can be interpreted as a symbol of battle, sacrifice, and glory, as the speaker says: “Its roots were nourished with their blood” (38). As the poem progresses, the tree represents the glory of the Welsh kingdom in that its boughs flourish, especially during summer when the singing birds suggest the prince’s greatness. However, Thomas moves on to autumn when the decaying tree is projected:

And frost of autumn picked the leaves

One by one from the gaunt boughs;

*They fell, some in a gold shower
About its roots, but some were hurled*

Out of my sight, out of my power,

*Over the face of the grim world.
(51-57)*

The transition between autumn and winter marks the decline of power, undermined by the English invasion. Here, the barren tree is depicted as the speaker hopes to see a person who will help the tree bud again. Thomas is determined to see and create a sense of hope and rebirth or resurrection of Welsh history in his poetry. “The Tree” is politically enriched with the ecological contexts of the rise and fall of the kingdom in the transition of the seasonal cycle, which plays an important role in the structure of history. The end of the poem conveys a strong message of revenge. The speaker calls for courage in the next generation to bring back the Welsh nation and revive its culture.

And he who stands in the light above

And sets his ear to the scarred bole,

Shall hear me tell from the deep tomb

How sorrow may bud the tree with tears,

But only his blood can make it bloom. (65-69)

Owain Glyn Dwr’s propaganda of Welsh national resurrection reflects Thomas’ strategy of Welsh cultural revival. The poet urges contemporary Welsh writers writing in English to study Welsh history and culture so that they can wrestle with the influx of English influence. The desire to

see the rebirth of the Welsh nation reminds readers of the “sham ghost” in “Welsh History” that haunts the poet with the ruined castles waiting for the future. In “The Tree”, the thematic presentation of history via war and power is a direct attempt to call attention to the endangered Welsh culture. Notably, the land is rich in its depth and complexity in relation to national history; the blood spilled on the soil clearly speaks for its rootedness in the Welsh mind-set. Daniel Westover (2011) views Thomas’ imagery of man and tree as a way to link the present with the past recreated in his poetry. Westover notes that “Thomas is searching for permanence, and the idea of man being like a tree – living to an old age, rooted in the soil, re-emerging annually – seems to have appealed to him personally to the extent that he wrote many poems containing man/tree metaphor” (p. 44). In this light, if the peasant’s hardship reflects seasonal transformations as an impermanent process of life and nature, then the rebirth of the tree, politically and culturally, advocates the successful revival of Welsh identity.

Thomas uses the nationalist propaganda at the early stage of his literary career; his quest for poetic identity is affiliated with questions of agrarian Wales and its cultural decline. However, the poet redundantly invokes his anxiety in these politics of identity by posing a question of his struggle and the journey to independent Wales in terms of cultural sustainability and environmental poetics. “No Through

Road” in *Song at the Year Turning* (1955) can be read as a reflection of his fading cultural scheme that needs a new trajectory to direct his oeuvre from the historical and political based-track to the examination of the earth.

As the title suggests, “No Through Road” reveals the poet’s frustration in his poetic strategy of characterising the peasant figure and his farmland, whilst modern development still thrives. He articulates his political and cultural scheme as a *dead end* that sees no solution, and falls into the same trap of nationalist propaganda. Thomas reiterates his political aim by addressing an anxiety in promoting the Welsh cultural revival and questioning true poetic inspiration as he returns to green metaphor in his work. Nevertheless, towards the end of the poem, Thomas acknowledges the call for creativity from the environment, which epitomises both natural and man-made surroundings. Welsh history, which used to be an effective weapon to launch nationalism in connection with language, might not be able to draw attention to the public anymore, while ecology seems to universally attract public awareness as a true source of poetic inspiration. Therefore, the speaker-I, by giving up his endeavour in the imagery of hard farm labour as a tool to critique class struggle and social injustice, looks for something new in this cultural revival. Thomas’ passion in the romantic description of the farmland, natural creatures, and immediate environments is intriguingly reconsidered. “No Through Road”

opens with the speaker's desperation:

*All in vain. I will cease now
My long absorption with the
plough,
With the tame and the wild crea-
tures
And man united with the earth.
I have failed many seasons
To bring truth to birth,
And nature's simple equations
In the mind's precincts do not
apply. (1-8)*

Thomas' despair in his "absorption" with farming culture, which represents the desperate Welsh ways of life among natural environments, seems to evoke a sense of loss in poetic motivation, as much as the decline of agrarian culture. His depiction of "man united with the earth" once again reveals his interest in man's relationship with nature; the narrator subtly criticises his failure to bring readers to the truth of nature. The anti-pastoral mode, which reflects hardship and a realist depiction of farm life, cannot attract readers to the essence of his poetry. Similarly, his nationalist propaganda can be read as Wales' unsuccessful rejection of outside influence in terms of materialism that universally moves the country to the city.

Thomas' despair over the Welshmen is preoccupied with his imposed preconception of the romantic, yet complicated country by the bleak and sardonic tone in his poetic representations. Randal Jenkins' analysis of Thomas' prose, "The Depopu-

lation of the Welsh Hill Country" shows that the poet has shaped his imagined Wales in a similar way to Wordsworth's conception of pastoral landscape in Cumbria. Jenkins argues that "[t]his idyllic portrait and the description of the social and cultural life of the community with its 'poets, musicians, pennilion singers, and men possessed of a rare personality', lead one to suggest that he is describing what he hoped to find when he first came to Manafon." (pp. 77-78). The romanticised image invoked in Thomas' mind suggests rustic Wales, but many times fails to represent the actual reality of the rural landscape.

Ultimately, what Thomas attempts to address in "No Through Road" is true poetic inspiration; the external environment in relation to modernity calls him to examine. Although the historical significance of Wales is necessarily powerful in its discourse to negotiate with English cultural domination, the Welsh environment and earth might be the transformative elements that reveal the ultimate and sustainable truth for his poetic creativity. By using green poetic language, Thomas deploys the earth to critique the distinction between nature and culture (the external environment and Welsh identity in poetry). In the second stanza, the poem focuses on the rhetorical question that examines the roots of being on Earth:

*But where to turn? Earth endures
After the passing, necessary shame
Of winter, and the old lie
Of green places beckons me still*

*From the new world, ugly and
evil,*

That men pry for in truth's name.
(9-14)

The initial question invokes a consideration of the immediate surroundings: the natural environment. Although the poet's endeavour in hard farm life fails to answer his motivation in poetic creativity and the interest of the public, nature is the only last resort in Thomas' poetic integrity. As the earth endures the passing winter, the poet has to resist "the old lie" that implies Welsh history. The natural landscape beckons him to locate poetry with present-day modernised Wales. There is a sense of scrutiny in the concept of history and its patriotic agenda in this "lie". In other words, the "old lie of green places" informs the imaginative, romanticised image of the Welsh countryside, which calls the poet back to the representation of Wales as hard farm life.

By depicting the new world of materialism as "ugly" and "evil", Thomas succeeds in claiming the tension between the use of history and culture to forward his poetic quest through the influx of external influences. In fact, the Welsh literary path is not the end road, but is instead a return to the old ways of life, the familiar environment of external nature, which yields never-ending and indefinite poetic inspiration. The consideration of the present environ-

ment, where nature meets culture, can be a solution to the *dead end* ("No Through Road"), which seems initially problematic, but constitutes a positive solution in the end.

CONCLUSION

R.S. Thomas' poetics of landscape in his representation of Wales illustrates the power of imagination and the role of language to reshape the environment. He constructs his re-imagined Welsh landscapes out of his conflicted identity in relation to external, cultural politics. Both romantic and bleak, the Welsh landscape is a product of his negotiation with personal identity and national politics. Through metaphorical language and environmental imagination, Welshness is written in English, which suggests the role of language as an effective tool in Thomas' literary scheme. As a master of his language, Thomas uses English to create the Welsh landscape of his imagination. Thomas' interest in national/local history, culture, and society on the verge of modern transformation has rendered his views on the Welsh environment riddled with contradictions, as we have seen in Iago Prytherch and Thomas' love-hate relationship with the earth. However, Thomas' passion for the natural environment is created with poetic beauty in the depiction of organic metaphor, which draws on hope from the integration of man and nature.

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