

DATGANIAD HAWLFRAINT

Gellir darllen y traethawd hwn o fewn Llyfrgell Prifysgol Cymru Y Drindod Dewi Sant yn unig, neu o fewn llyfrgell sefydliad sy'n ei fenthg drwy fenthyciad rhyng-lyfrgelloi.

O dan y gyfraith, cynhyrchir traethawd ymchwil argraffedig at ddibenion arholiad ac nid yw'n cael ei ystyried yn waith cyhoeddedig. Wrth ymgynghori â'r traethawd ymchwil hwn, mae'r darllenydd yn cydnabod mai'r awdur sydd â hawlfraint y gwaith ac na ellir cyhoeddi dyfyniad ohono na gwybodaeth sy'n deillio ohono heb gydsyniad yr awdur ymlaen llaw.

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October, 1995



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ALL

A discussion of the ideological and cultural confrontations in the
forum of, and potential arising from:

YSBRYDOLIAETH - R.S. THOMAS - INSPIRATION,
an Exhibition of Poems by R.S. Thomas, with Paintings by
Nineteen Welsh Artists, interviews with seven of the artists
and an interview with R.S. Thomas himself

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
the degree of 'Master of Arts' in **The Word and the Visual**
Imagination

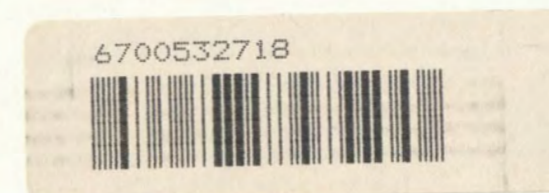
by

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October, 1995



ALL

Summary

This study is initially concerned with the spatial aspects of the exhibition space as a forum for the display, communication, and identification of art-forms. The art form's capacity as constructed and socially delineated ties in with my examination of the exhibition 'environment' itself as an artificial meeting-point in general, and the traditions which make this coincidence possible..

Although the subject of the work is the marginalisation of a culture, this culturally specific 'manufactured space' can act as a 'hypertext' for universal models of cultural, linguistic, perceptual, historical, and literary identity (and, of course, *location*). During the course of the work, a dialectic between the concepts of *produced* and *circumstantial* 'place' is hoped to be fostered effectively, and shown to pertain to all aspects of the above, both in a visual, and literary context. Illustrations of these concerns will be linked to the *dominant/marginal* modes within a generally post-imperial framework.

In the context of the exhibition, I hope to bring to issue the objectivity of the phenomenon of 'place', both as a 'found' and as a 'constructed' entity. I intend to show how this objectivity is intertwined with the conscious objectification of language in R.S. Thomas's poetry. Thus, the barrier of a 'lesser-spoken' European language which exists between the poet and the painters (the majority of them) is seen as fundamental to the understanding of the discussion, as indeed are the questions of 'indigenous culture' and 'authentic art'. The comparison between *translation* from one culture to another, and *transposition* from one artistic medium to another is brought to issue, but the intention is not to reconcile the two, rather to create a new space for speculation and understanding, thus emulating the exhibition itself.

Acknowledgements

The most obvious acknowledgements to make are the debts owed to the artists for their boundless encouragement, and their willingness to engage with the questions put to them. Then there is the poet himself, of course, who, contrary to all presuppositions, was gracious, co-operative, and generous with his time and energy. I shall never forget my encounter with him... . One person who has not been acknowledged by an interview transcript is Peter Lord, who contributed energy and encouragement at an early stage, as did Dylan Iorwerth, editor of Golwg.

Belinda Humfrey gave me the opportunity to attend the M.A. course, and supervised this study with words of wisdom, and the European Social Fund which provided sponsorship. Ann Price-Owen also made initial suggestions for the structure of the research, but it was the help and support of the Davies family in Cardiff whose passionate selfhood introduced me to a world which I might never have known. Last, but by no means least, I return to a discussion in a certain tea shop in Aberystwyth, and to the initial suggestion for the subject which came from Catrin Meirion.

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Preface

The original idea for this research came from an article that was brought to my attention in a Summer issue of *Golwg*, the Welsh-language 'magazine'. It was about the ailing financial state of Plas Glyn-y-Weddw, an independent gallery in Llanbedrog on Pen Llyn (Llyn Peninsula, N. Wales). The article covered the details both of the history of the gallery - the bank calling in the receivers and so on - and the current exhibition. It caught my attention, as I had for a long time been looking for a subject-matter which would combine my interests in firstly visual/literary theory, secondly twentieth-century literature, thirdly landscape politics, fourthly the cultural aspect of the Welsh Nation, and fifthly in exhibition environments. I wanted to produce something which would hold currency both inside and outside academia, as well as being significantly 'contemporary' to be dynamic. Previous research had led me to accounts either of 'Tours in Wales' whose specifically *literary* (as opposed to historical) merits are unrecognised, volumes by writers such as R.S.Thomas, but which lacked a 'visual' element, or finally illustrations of 'tours' into fantastical realms which had nothing to do with the 'cultural studies' approach which I enjoy.

Therefore, it was with some pleasure that I embarked upon the exploration into this exhibition, which seemed to act as a 'hypertext' for so many other fields of interest. There was this particular group of painters, their views on the arts in Wales, their attitudes towards R.S.Thomas's poetry, their conception of 'Ysbrydoliaeth', or 'Inspiration', and their idiosyncrasies of expression, amongst the areas to explore. R.S.Thomas very kindly spared me a good hour from his amazingly busy schedule at the end of my research. His concept of 'Ysbrydoliaeth' confirmed the general structure of my argument.

Thomas sees the correspondence of poetry with music or painting as 'a kind of translation'. In the introduction to The New Poetry, A. Alvarez states that 'The great moderns experimented not just to make it new formally, but to open poetry up to new areas of experience'¹. True enough to form, 'making it new' was a phrase which Thomas employed. He also talked a great deal about English/Welsh 'translation' and used it as a reference point when I asked him about his attitude towards cross-media experimentation (a topic, incidentally, of which he was wary to the point of cynicism).

I also had the good fortune of talking to the art critic Peter Lord (on the advice of various people, including Ivor Davies) at the start of the field research. He has for some time been employed by the University of Wales at their Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies for research into 'The Visual Culture of Wales'. It soon became evident that Aesthetics of Relevance, as well as his previous work for the Arts Council of Wales, constitute a sufficiently eminent driving force in the arts in Wales for me to include in my list of questions: 'What do you think of Peter Lord?'. I didn't meet a single artist who was unfamiliar with him, which is a credit to his work.

My original purpose, which I explained to Lord, was to focus on individual poetic relationships within the exhibition. A possible structure, I told him, was to start from a type of 'review'-style section, which would discuss how the exhibition was made up. Then I would raise the issue of the poet in the twentieth century, as well as the issue of modern literary, visual, and cultural theories. The third section would focus in on how the artists felt about the paintings and the poems together, how they felt about Wales and these cultural issues, and whether this was borne out by their work. I would attempt to arrive

¹A. Alvarez, The New Poetry, (London: Penguin, 1966), p21.

eventually at some end to do with the cultural location of this form of art in the community.

Peter Lord's current project, it transpired, was a study of insider/outsider issues in the imaging of the landscape. Looking at the catalogue which I showed him, he mentioned the work of Selwyn Jones, Iwan Bala, and Leslie Jones as 'insiders'. He compared these with David Woodford, 'the classic outsider, who is an aggressive outsider, and denies any kind of cultural content in the landscape at all. He is like the new visual Right. There's an interesting series of issues here.'² His wisest words were to warn me of the proportions which this work could take on, but he encouraged me to go ahead with what *I* was interested in all the same.

The foundation of my discussion was that, contrary to the old ideas of visual arts retaining some inherent meaning in the present century, they only hold semantic currency in relation to the participants themselves. Peter Lord was the first person I had read who had comprehensively brought twentieth century cultural criticism to bear on the Welsh culture, and I have ended up using his ideas on several occasions. He told me:

People like Donald Moore believe in the old view that the image (painted or literary) has a meaning which is fixed and inviable. So it carries its own value and meaning with it. I take the opposite view that the thing has no meaning except in terms of a relationship with the viewer... This argument is one that I think still needs to be addressed. People in places of power still have the old view, however obsolete, and they are the people who condition art in the cultural setting. I wouldn't, in your paper, take it for granted that your view, which is broadly similar to mine, can be taken as read and is one which you can state as obvious³.

So in this context, culture is located, and at play, within the products of a society, thus is manifest in artistic texts. The definition of

²From an interview with him on 5th July, 1995, in the Centre for Advanced Celtic Studies, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

³ibid.

an artistic text is one that includes everything which is a structured conception, and can encompass such socially-manufactured ideas as 'the landscape'. Thus, according to modern human geographical opinion on how landscapes may be 'described', 'written', or 'defined' by society, be it contrived or circumstantial:

A landscape possesses a similar objective fixity to that of a written text. It also becomes detached from the intentions of its original authors, and in terms of social and psychological impact and material consequences the various readings of landscapes matter more than any authorial intentions.⁴

<i>Crucifixion, The Card Players</i> , 1981.	Alex Campbell <i>The Court Players</i> , 1995. (opp. page 10)
<i>St. John in X</i> , 1992.	<i>Group of Filers</i> , 1995.(page 10)
<i>Solar</i> , 1981.	Ivor Davies <i>Solar</i> , 1992-95. (opp. page 10)
(<i>Abstraxw</i>) (extract), 1978.	<i>Invisible World</i> , 1995.] <small>not included due to error.</small>
<i>The Minister</i> (extract), 1953.	Donald McIntyre <i>Winter</i> , 1993. (opp. page 15)
<i>The Minister</i> (extract), 1953.	Aurora, 1995.
<i>The Prayer</i> , 1973.	Tom Gahan <i>The Prayer</i> , 1993. (opp. page 25)
<i>Good Friday</i> , 1975.	<i>Good Friday</i> , 1995.
<i>The Unborn</i> (extract), 1963	Clive Raine <i>The Unborn</i> , 1995.
<i>The Welsh Hill Country</i> , 1952.	<i>The Welsh Hill Country</i> , 1995.

⁴Aberrazog (Gower, Llandudno, 1976), pp5-18 which describes a mythical 'Valley'. Davies says: 'I have a very clear understanding of what the poem signifies. It's in it with a far-off land, an image specific to Wales. Indicative of the role of this in the poem: "To one who knows something about the history of the Welsh countryside and who tries it occasionally, it is indeed a disadvantage to be..." which is also it expression' (Gower, Llandudno, ed.

⁴Editors' Introduction, *Writing Worlds*, ed. by T. Barnes/J. Duncan (London: Routledge, 1992), p6.

List of All Poems, Titles of All Paintings
(including page references)

POEM

- 'That', 1968.
- 'The Minister'(extract), 1953.
- 'Welsh Landscape', 1952.
- 'The Gap in the Hedge', 1952.
- 'Cezanne. The Card Players', 1981.
- 'Sonata in X', 1992.
- 'Senior', 1981.
- ['Abercuawg'(extract), 1976.*
- 'The Minister'(extract), 1953.
- 'The Minister'(extract), 1953.
- 'The Prayer', 1975.
- 'Good Friday', 1975.
- 'The Untamed'(extract), 1963
- 'The Welsh Hill Country', 1952.

PAINTING

- David Tress
Winter Valley, 1995.
(**opp.page17**)
Marginal Land, 1995.
- Emrys Parry
Welsh Landscape, 1995.
(**opp.page 32**)
The Gap in the Hedge, 1995.
- Alex Campbell
The Card Players, 1995.
(**opp.page 10**)
Group of Hikers, 1995.(**page 10**)
- Ivor Davies
Senior, 1992-95.
(**opp.page 16**)
Intangible Mona, 1995.]
- not exhibited due to error.
- Donald McIntyre
Winter, 1995.
(**opp.page 15**)
Autumn, 1995.
- Tony Goble
The Prayer, 1995.
(**opp.page 25**)
Good Friday, 1995.
- Glyn Baines
The Untamed, 1995.
The Welsh Hill Country, 1995.

* Abercuawg (Gomer, Llandysul, 1976), pp5-18 which describes a mythical 'Valhalla'. Davies says: 'I have a very clear understanding of what this poem signifies. It's to do with a far-off land, an utopia specific to Wales'. Indicative of the tone of this is the sentence: 'To one who knows something about the beauty of the Welsh countryside and who loves it passionately, it is indeed a disadvantage to be without the linguistic resources with which to give it expression' (Selected Prose, ed. by Sandra Anstey, intro. by Ned Thomas, (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1983.)p156)

- 'Summer', 1952.
 'The Lonely Farmer', 1952.
- 'The Small Window', 1968.
 'The Mountains' (extract), 1968.
- 'Welsh Landscape', 1952.
- 'Out of the Hills', 1946.
 'Barn Owl', 1977.
- 'Ah!', 1966.
 'Girl', 1966.
- 'A Land', 1987.
 'Expatriates', 1958.
- 'Tidal', 1992.
 'Match my Moments', 1992.
- 'Arrival', 1983.
 'Remembering David Jones', 1983.
- 'At the Bright Hem of God' (extract from 'The Mountains'), 1968.
 'The Moor', 1966.
- 'Welsh Landscape', 1952.
 'Welsh Landscape', 1952.
- William Selwyn
Winter, 1995.
 (opp.page 37)
The Lonely Farmer, 1995.
- Gwyneth Tomos
The Small Window, 1995.
Llanberis, 1995.(page 9)
- Gwilym Pritchard
Welsh Landscapes, 1995.
- Selwyn Jones
Hill Farmer, 1995.
Barn Owl, 1995.
- Leslie Jones
Ah!, 1995.(opp.page 23)
Girl, 1995.(page 22)
- Iwan Bala
A Land, 1995.
 (opp.page 43)
Expatriates, 1995.
 (page 6)
- Alina Mroczkowska
Trust, **caption:** '...where trust may take root and grow', 1994.
Match my Moments, 1995.(page 3)
- Maredudd ap Iestyn
Arrival, 1995.
Remembering David Jones, 1995.
- David Woodford
Brief Sun, 1995.
The Moor, 1995.
- Peter Prendergast
Foothills of Tryfan 1, 1995.
Foothills of Tryfan 2, 1995.

'The Welsh Hill Country', 1952.
'Winter', 1992.

Vaughan Bevan
The Welsh Hill Country
(at Bryn Glas), 1995.
Winter, 1995.

'At The End', 1995.
'The Empty Church', 1978.

Will Rowlands
At The End, 1995.
The Empty Church, 1995.

Other Poems of Interest/Relevance:

- 'Hiraeth', from The Stones of the Field, 1946.
- 'Welsh History', from An Acre of Land, 1952.
- 'Priest and Peasant', from Song at a Year's Turning, 1955.
- 'Absolution', from Poetry for Supper, 1958.
- 'Welsh', from The Bread of Truth, 1963.
- 'Nocturne by Ben Shahn', from H'm, 1972.
- 'The Gap', from Laboratories of the Spirit, 1975.
- 'Abercuawg', from Frequencies, 1978.
- 'The New Mariner', from Between Here and Now, 1981.
- 'Captain Cook's Last Voyage'. Roland Penrose, from Ingrowing Thoughts, 1985.
- 'Father and Child. Ben Shahn', from Ingrowing Thoughts, 1985.
- 'Looking Glass', from Experimenting with an Amen, 1986. (page 1)
- 'Their Canvasses Are', from Experimenting with an Amen, 1986.
- 'Saunders Lewis', from Welsh Airs, 1987.
- 'Annunciation', from Mass for Hard Times, 1992.

Well, mirrors are very fascinating things, and it depends how much you've got to spend in front of them. Some people are so busy, they only get a chance to take a peek in the mirror to see that their hair is straight, that there's no black on their face, and that sort of thing; whereas some people have more time, they are confronted by the image which makes them wonder "Is that the person?". The mirror in a way is troubling because it's your translation of the image that the mirror has taken. It's an outside image in a way.

Wyn Thomas's introduction to the catalogue also discusses the idea of people who, have, in the long tradition of composing "cerddi ymryson", been talking back to B.S. Thomas for over forty years, and mentions T. Hani Jones, Hani Webb, and Roland Manilla, amongst others. That it is through the works of writers such as these

Looking Glass

There is a game I play
with a mirror, approaching
it when I am not there,
as though to take by surprise

the self that is my familiar. It
is in vain. Like one eternally
in ambush, fast or slow
as I may raise my head, it raises

its own, catching me in the act,
disarming me by acquaintance,
looking full into my face as often
as I try looking at it askance.

from Experimenting with an Amen, 1986.

Introduction

In the introduction to the catalogue for the Ysbrydoliaeth R.S.Thomas Inspiration exhibition which the 'Friends of Plas Glyn-y-Weddw' commissioned him to write, M. Wynn Thomas concludes using the poet's own words:

The hope must surely be that R.S.Thomas will "meet himself/everywhere" here, albeit in unexpected guise, and that we, readers turned viewers (and also, perhaps, viewers hereby converted to reading), "can witness the extent/Of the spectrum and grow rich/With looking."(see Appendix A)

When asked about the concept of poetic reflection in relation to this particular exhibition, R.S.Thomas said:

Well, mirrors are very fascinating things, and it depends how much time you've got to spend in front of them. Some people are so busy, they only just have a chance to take a peek in the mirror to see that their tie is straight, that there's no black on their face, and that sort of thing; whereas some people have more time: they are confronted by this image which makes them wonder "is that the person?". The mirror in a way is translating because it's your translation of the image that the mirror has taken. It's an endless regress in a way(see Appendix B, trans. 8).

Wynn Thomas's introduction to the catalogue also discusses the idea of people who, 'have, in the time honoured tradition of composing "cerddi ymryson", been talking back to R.S.Thomas for over forty years', and mentions T.Harri Jones, Harri Webb, and Roland Matthias, amongst others. Thus it is through the works of writers such as these

that I have investigated the meaning of this idea of 'talking back' and in precisely which 'language' the 'talking' is being conducted.

The processes of cultural 'talkback' are constantly under the scrutiny of conscientious critics such as the Celtic/Cultural Studies-based Peter Lord. It is not the purpose of this study to examine the politics of R.S.Thomas's works in themselves, but rather to investigate specifically the literary works used *in the exhibition* at Plas Glyn-y-Weddw, and how *they* work alongside the plastic/graphic works they were designated for (or were designated for them).

In an essay to be included in the catalogue to Hiraeth (trans: Longing), a drama/painting exhibition held in Cardiff in 1993, Fintan O'Toole states that 'Political power arises, not from the barrel of a gun, but from the gathering together of people in the same place. And the agreement that any number of individual places constitute "the same place" is a function of history and culture, not of geography'⁵. The concept of 'place' as a product of nurture, as opposed to nature, as *produced* as opposed to *circumstantial*, has fundamental repercussions for the modern identification of a marginalised culture, within its own spatial productions⁶.

Many of the paintings at Plas Glyn-y-Weddw are on this landscape 'space' basis, but, true to the form of the poetry, are hardly straightforward celebrations of an agreed natural 'beauty'. On arrival at the gallery, it is pleasing to see a concept of a multi-dimensional environment and an artistic/political paradox put into play by the

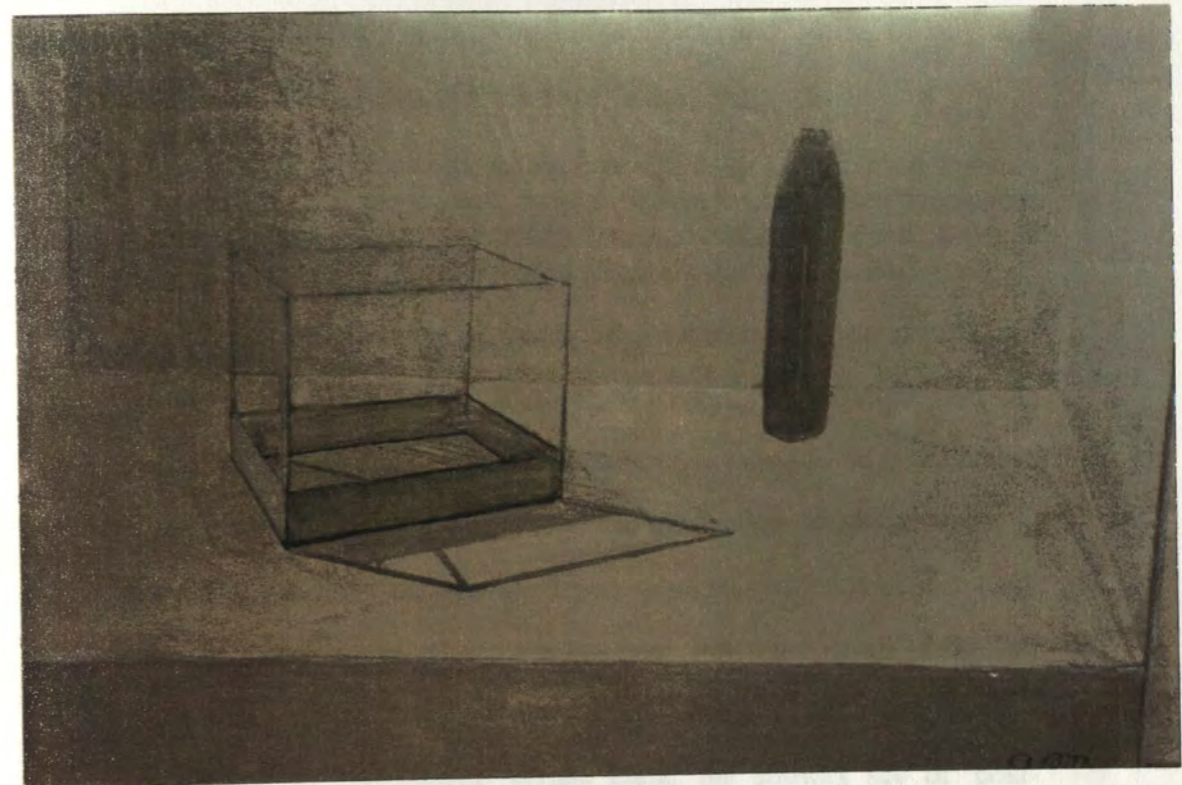
⁵Fintan O'Toole, catalogue of Hiraeth: New Paintings by Iwan Bala, with a play by Edward Thomas (ORIEL/Welsh Arts Council, 1993), p15.

⁶N.B.: 'A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place'(The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures, ed. by Terence Hawkes, (London: Routledge, 1989), p9)

picture-poem partnerships. There is plenty of room for the discussion of cross-reference here, and spatial issues to do with the exhibition lay-out are repeated between the lines of the poems and behind the glass itself. In my investigation of the 'translation' theme, I found myself measuring-up the definition of 'Inspiration' against the definition of 'Narrative', where 'Narrative' was to be found in the cradle of cultural, political, and social agendas:

Match My Moments(extract)

... That time
the queue winding towards
the gas chambers, and the nun,
who had already died
to this world, to the girl
in tears: Don't cry. Look,
I will take your place...



Alina Mroczkowska - **Match My Moments**

Equally, ideological argument denies the feasibility of art to exist in a cultural vacuum, acknowledging the intrinsically political nature of *all art*, because it depends upon a common institution of social discourse, an arbitrarily agreed poetics of representation. Post-

marxist observers see all media as, even if not a conspired, certainly an engineered and generated 'mechanism', and Louis Althusser labels these cultural workings as part of an 'Ideological State Apparatus'.

In Althusser's view, this is contrasted with the 'Suppressive State Apparatus' - namely the legal system in the form of the police, and functions as the social behavioural norms enforced by everything from 'Greenwich Mean Time' to road traffic lights. Close-to-the-bone criticisms of modern-day totalitarianism which can be found in Orwell's 1984, or Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, illustrate a futuristic extension of the 'suppressive' aspect of this idea, but also illustrate how ideology and suppression work together. Thus, 'State Apparatuses' locate themselves ultimately in the semantic processes and 'norms' of language and discourses. In terms of the 'norms' of language:

Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice⁷.

With the concept of 'place' so in evidence in the poems and pictures of the Plas Glyn-y-Weddw exhibition, it is obvious that the nature and construction of *this* cultural norm is going to be at the centre of the discussion. The research into the production of any art-form in modern Wales must incorporate a post-colonial dialectics of this kind, since the country is in effect (and has been, since the death of the last ruling prince (Llwyn) in the late thirteenth century) occupied. In their introduction to The Empire Writes Back, the authors say of 'post-colonial literatures' that:

Beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics... they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonisation and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of

⁷ibid., p7.

the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial.⁸

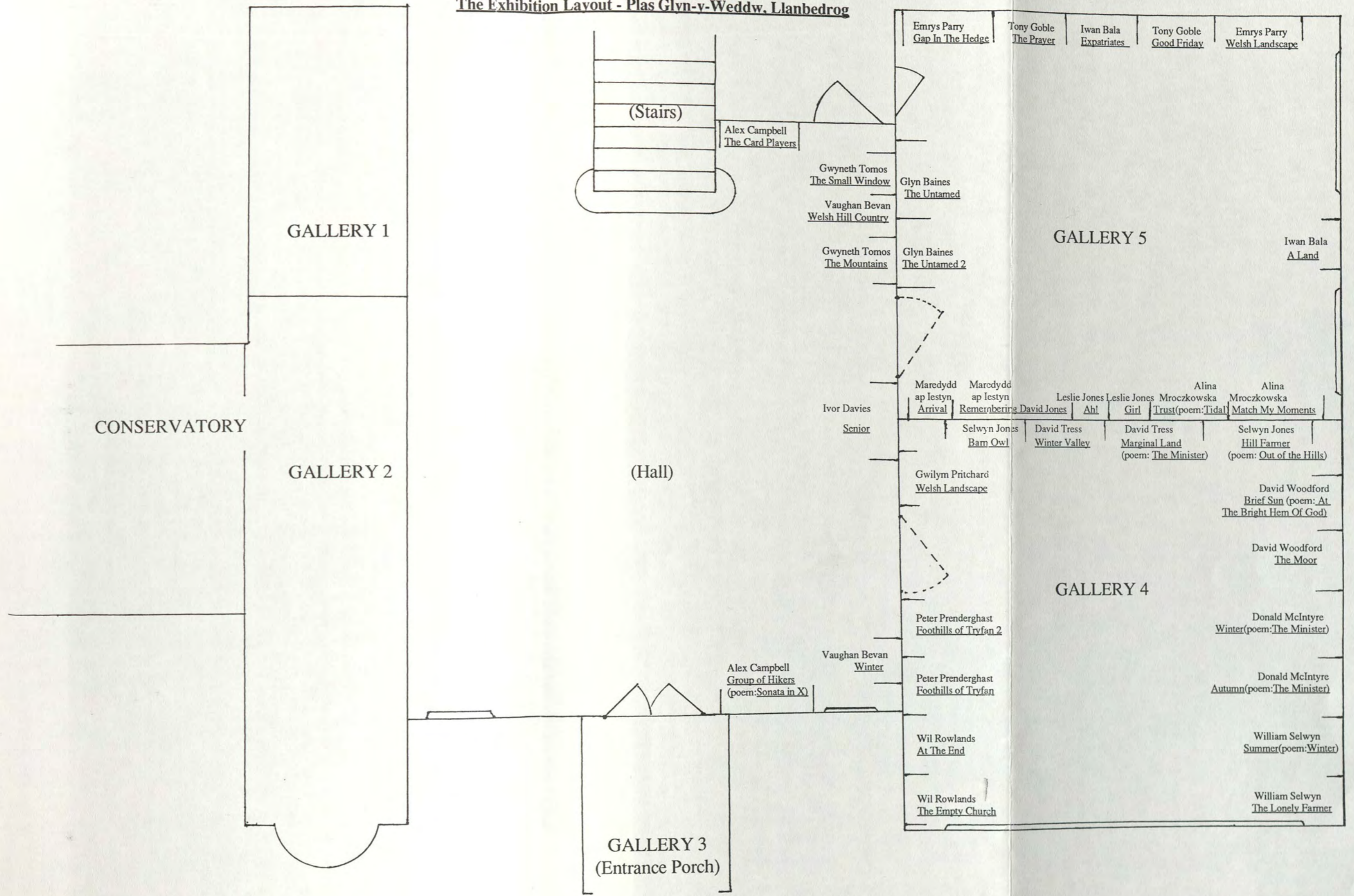
Brian Morris says of R.S. Thomas that 'Although he is Welsh, he speaks (as the poet always writes) in English, and this is indicative of the subdued paradoxes, problems and obliquities which lie beneath the surface⁹. Written in English, and repeatedly chastising itself for its dependence upon the discursive norms of that medium, the poetry incorporates a complex, ambivalent, and unique eye-glass into twentieth century Wales.

Apart from the 'post-imperialist' agenda which is bound to exist at Plas Glyn-y-Weddw, there is the more culturally universal issue in evidence in the display of the 'mixed media' format. I have attempted to illustrate the network of ways in which the arbitrarily constructed discourses of language and of painting share the same recourse to tradition, the same aspirations to modernity, and the same ultimate self-consciousness. Possibly the narrative of the exhibition is deliberately dysfunctional - we may certainly accept it as such - but in line with William Carlos Williams's precept 'no ideas but in things', the continuity of narrative in the display is abandoned for 'instances of difference'. The audience may engage with these signifying systems, but the motion is *into and out of* - rather than along - the works.

⁸Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *ibid.*, p2.

⁹Brian Morris, 'The Topography of R.S. Thomas', *The Little Review*, 13/14, (1980), p5-11.

The Exhibition Layout - Plas Glyn-y-Weddw, Llanbedrog



The Exhibition Layout

As may be gathered from the catalogue to the Ysbrvdoliaeth R.S.Thomas Inspiration exhibition, the way the works are displayed indicates a traditional methodology: the paintings, mounted on the walls, are 'accompanied' by their respective poems, which are printed in clear, readable, but fairly small black text on white paper underneath the painting. (See **Opposite**). This 'marries' the two formats comfortably, and does not vary for different paintings. The one exception to this is Iwan Bala's 'Expatriates', which actually includes the poem in text format *within* the painting, partly obscured by the paint on the underside of the glass/perspex.

Expatriates

Not British; certainly
 Not English. Welsh
 With all the associations,
 Black hair and black heart
 Under a smooth skin,
 Sallow as vellum; sharp
 Of bone and wit that is turned
 As a knife against us.
 Four centuries now
 We have been leaving
 The hills and the high moors
 For the jewelled pavements
 Easing our veins of their dark peat
 By slow transfusions.
 In the drab streets
 That never knew
 The cold stream's sibilants
 Our tongues are coated with
 A dustier speech.
 With the year's passing
 We have forgotten
 The far lakes,
 Aled and Eiddwen, whose blue litmus
 Alone could detect
 The mind's acid.



Iwan Bala - Expatriates

The poem is, of course, mounted on the wall below the picture as well. Few of the artists interviewed expressed any dissatisfaction at the way the exhibition had been hung¹⁰. There are various ways in which the exhibition could have been presented. The actual way was comfortable, and fitted the peaceful surroundings of Plas Glyn y Weddw, and probably the disposition of the typical viewer or visitor to that gallery. The idea of the exhibition, as much as anything else, was to promote the sales of the paintings (except, perhaps, for David Woodford's two paintings which were not for sale. When asked about this, Woodford said he wanted to get the paintings back, and to 'keep them for a while').

It may be instructive to give an outline of Dafydd Ap Tomos's unprepared answers to questions on the subject of his methods and intentions for the hanging of the exhibition. Tomos has no idea of what the reaction of the poet would be to the exhibition, as one of the first things he points out is that it was not sanctioned by R.S.Thomas. Having briefly covered the whys, wherefores, and main protagonists behind the exhibition, Tomos went on to explain his concerns as to which paintings would 'hang well' together. Whilst judging it important to keep the paintings of each artist as close together as possible, it was also important to combine light registers in a complementary way.

The sizes of the paintings were also important, as a level along the wall provides a better overall aesthetics, and, of course, the walls are limited in height. This may well be the reason why the Ivor Davies

¹⁰Alex Campbell springs particularly to mind as an appreciator of Dafydd ap Tomos's keepership skills. The exception is David Woodford, who said:

I don't think there is a narrative in the exhibition. I think it's been - to put it tactlessly - "slung together". The mistake was to leave it up to the artists. That divided the issue up between that number of artists!(See Appendix B, trans. 5)

However, the question then arises: 'If the artists had been given an agenda, would they then have been "painting" or "illustrating"?' R.S. Thomas himself absolutely agreed that the artists should have been given a 'free rein'.

and Alex Campbell paintings (see below) are in the hallway - they are quite dominant as paintings, and better kept away from the more classical feel of the inner rooms. Further discussion with the exhibition's hanger went on to cover the problematics of making paintings go well together in the gallery, and how a painting can change its personality when taken away and hung on a living-room wall. Paintings can sometimes look 'too loud' once they are bought and taken home. On the other hand, an exhibition hanger can never tell how paintings will look together before they are put onto the walls.

Tomos concluded that once paintings are brought together in this forum 'it's got its own life, then, an exhibition'. This is not to say, however, that there is an intentional narrative 'as an installation'. Tomos denies any narrative intent, but the attention of the viewer still follows a very well-defined pathway. In this, there are two visual methods at work on the viewer.

The first is the idea of placing Ivor Davies's 'The Senior' in the hallway. This piece is of an ethereal composition. It is in oil, and consists in a misty combination of blues and turquoises. It is immediately attractive because of its evocative and mystical ambience, and its modernity can appeal to a broad cross-section of viewers. It also serves as a good painting with which to 'pull-in' the viewer, as its message is in its detail.

The second manipulation of the prospective viewer quite probably exists within the careful placing of both of Gwynedd Tomos's paintings in the hallway. The attraction for a local audience of seeing paintings which have been done by somebody they know is an incentive in itself, but for the visiting viewer, too, there is a particular attraction in having the actual artist present - to be able to converse and discuss

year in which it was published - ...

the work is a great point of interest, and makes for a memorable and personal experience.

The Mountains(extract)

**It is not good to live by mountains.
They demand human sacrifice.
Every year someone must die**



Gwyneth Tomos - Llanberis

Before going on to the main rooms of the exhibition, there is a further factor which should be taken into account, a third way in which the hanger has manipulated the spatial dimensions of the gallery. Gwynedd Tomos's contribution is, on a superficial level, particularly noticeable because she paints in two completely different formats. 'The Small Window' is painted in oil, and depicts a typically formulated 'picture postcard' type view. It is 'representational' rather than 'abstract', and involves lots of detail, and a straightforward perspective. Next to it, however, is the other work, which has a completely different style. It is a raw composition with almost shocking use of palette knife. It is painted after a simple, even minimalist, extract from Thomas's prose piece 'The Mountains' which runs: 'It is not good to live by mountains. They demand human sacrifice. Every year someone must die.' This quotation only hints at the exquisite, almost visionary piece of prose from which it was taken. I wonder if the general mood of 1968 - the year in which it was published - contributes in any way to the almost

The Card Players

And neither of them has said:
Your lead.
An absence of trumps
will arrest movement.

Knees almost touching,
hands almost touching,
they are far away
in time in a world
of equations.

The pipe without
smoke, the empty
bottle, the light
on the wall are the clock
they go by.
Only their minds
lazily as flies
drift
round and round the inane
problem their boredom
has led them to pose.



TWO: THE CARD PLAYERS
Artistic style: Vorticism 1992 Alex Campbell
Medium: Oil 30" x 40"
Inspired by: Cezanne
The Card Players is based on 'The Card Players' by Paul Cézanne (1890-1891, oil, 1900) and is displayed in the collection of the Tate Gallery.

'uncharacteristic' naiveté of this side of R.S.Thomas. Anyway, Gwyneth Tomos's usage is a sufficiently minimal 'chunk' to evoke a peculiar essence of raw sublimity.

Having passed from one painting to another, one is eventually confronted by Alex Campbell's 'Vorticist' style. (See Opposite). As well as presenting another extremity of style which is intriguing, 'The Card Players' also provides that self-reflexive element that anyone familiar either with the poet or twentieth-century art history will appreciate. The name of this painting, named after R.S.Thomas's poem (1981) about Cezanne's painting of the same name, causes a pause for thought on the matter of 'the chicken-and-the-egg', as it were. Turning around a hundred-and-eighty degrees, the viewer then confronts, on the other side of the hallway, the other Alex Campbell painting 'Group of Hikers' which was painted to go with the poem 'Sonata in X' (1992).

Sonata in X (extract)

'I love you.'
'How much?'
' $1^2 \times \sqrt{-1}$.'
'Wait a minute, let me
compute my thanks.
There.
Meet me tonight
at SH 126 243
so we may
consummate our statistics'



Alex Campbell - Group of Hikers

Modernity, cubism, surrealism, mysticism, romanticism. These are words which describe the initial experience of the entrance-hall. What this underpins, of course, is the commercial aspect of the gallery: that it is self-supporting, autonomous, independent, is sharply in contrast with its scenic surroundings. Entering the interior rooms, one is at first struck by the wealth of artistic formats - not only are paintings and poems on display, but sculpture adorns the floor-space, mounted on pedestals in an uncluttered, but richly atmospheric way. The high ceilings of the gallery - unadorned and well-lit, lend a classical, even baroque feel to the whole. There is no indication of where to start one's 'taking-in' of the display, but this is something for which one is prepared - having just come from the very 'modern', intertextual, hallway display.

On close inspection of the works, the first factor to be noticed is that there is a price-tag on each work. This sudden sense of 'gritty reality' serves well to introduce the viewer to the seething material world of the poem-painting combination. The dynamic nature of this dialogue demands the peaceful space of the gallery for pondering. The narrative action happens in-and-out of the painting, and uses the vehicle of the poem for its expression. Sometimes the master-slave relationship between word and image is reversed, in another case it will be conflated. The immediate tone of the exhibition appears to bear out the general theme of 'putting transposition/translation into process in an overt way', of index to a broader spectrum. Alex Campbell has prepared the way for this, and it is combinations such as Leslie Jones's evocation of Ben Shahn's work which continues it. The consequences of Leslie Jones's reference to the United Nations statesman Dag Hammarskjöld leads the onlooker into an international arena.

An interesting point is raised in Anne Price-Owen's statement that 'R.S.Thomas expects us to find parallels and to look for cross

references in his poetic works... he has no desire for his poems to be read in isolation¹¹. At the same time, J.P. Ward, in his essay 'The Figure Rooted' tells us that 'The poem must be able to stand alone. Yet there is no doubt that R.S. Thomas orders his collections in careful sequences'¹². What can we glean from these two statements? One possible conclusion is that Thomas orders his poems to encourage the reader to look *outside* the context of the immediate poetry. He points towards things which lie outside of the normal literary context. The exhibition enacts this lateral indexing, and it is obviously very important that Ben Shahn's portrait of Hammarskjöld, which included an atomic cloud, is used by Jones as a celebration of the statesman himself. Additionally, there is a comment here on the various participants to this piece; to Shahn, Thomas, and Leslie Jones himself, not to mention Van Gogh, Cezanne, and Renoir, all of whom influenced Shahn's work. And so, as Dafydd Ap Tomos explains, this exhibition is 'at the heart' of Welsh culture in its radical, yet traditional, its specific, yet intertextual, formation.

Reflected back upon R.S. Thomas's work, questions of social roles also prove interesting food for thought. For instance, the interchangeable roles of poet, priest and peasant in his work are extensively covered in 'Exploring the God-Space; the later poetry of R.S. Thomas', where Ken Edward Smith directs us to Thomas's 'Absolution'(1955), in which 'the peasant fulfils the priestly function that the priest for a time cannot fill'¹³. This is typical of 'the post-modern strategy, which "collapses subjective upon objective poles without, at

¹¹Anne Price-Owen, 'Provoked by Innocence; a Theme in R.S. Thomas's painting poems', *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*, 73 (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, February/March 1989), *Planet* 73, p66.

¹²J.P. Ward, 'The Figure Rooted', chapter 1 of his *The Poetry of R.S. Thomas*, (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1987), p20.

¹³Ken Edward Smith, 'Exploring the God-Space; the later poetry of R.S. Thomas', *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*, 73 (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, February/March 1989), p54.

the same time, having to posit a transcendental principle"¹⁴, but at the same time Thomas's stance avoids that of stereotypical 'post-modernism' by reaching beyond the discourse of art into the sociological quarter:

There are certain fundamental misunderstandings which may be endemic in our secular society. The two professions of priest and poet are so divorced in the public eye as to be quite beyond the possibility of symbiosis¹⁵

... and the ecclesiastical quarter:

How can anyone who is not a poet ever fully understand the gospels with their accumulation of metaphor?¹⁶.

Throughout all of this it is the figure in the picture which acts as a vehicle and reference-point for these thoughts, and so, of course, in many situations we may read for 'personal identity', 'national identity' and so on.

The social role of art in Wales is only really challenged by the material questions of patronage, and, in a wider cultural context, relevance. The idea of 'commercial viability' is more a part of the central issue of the arts than is acknowledged, and international recognition is something which has had to be balanced out against a strong national identity. This is something which is broached by David Woodford in interview. Woodford is ostensibly a proponent of the *redundancy* of the still image, although it transpires that he is merely making the point that the twentieth century has forgotten the role of the still image (N.B.: 'he supports himself and his family through his paintings'¹⁷). The modern

¹⁴Edward Larrissey, Reading Twentieth Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects, (London: Blackwell, 1990), p179. Larrissey here is quoting Slinger, by Ed Dorn, (Berkeley: Wingbow Press, 1975).

¹⁵Sandra Anstey(ed.), R.S. Thomas: Selected Prose, p91.

¹⁶*ibid.*, p90. This note and the one above refer to Thomas's article A Frame for Poetry, on p169 of the T.L.S., from 3rd March, 1966.

¹⁷David Woodford's catalogue for: A Celebration of Snowdonia: An Exhibition of Paintings by David Woodford/Dathlu Eryri Arddangosfa o Baentiadau, (The National Trust, 1991).

question of commercial viability cannot be ignored for much longer, but other artists have a more flexible or 'pluralistic' approach to the image. Nevertheless, this argument is certainly very important to the issues of national/cultural acknowledgement, autonomy, and canonical acceptance (prestige, indigenaeity, authenticity). It is discussed at length under the later section on The State of the Art, and The Practicalities (below). The concept of 'the land' element in 'landscape painting' is brought to the fore by the obvious use of different painting styles in the exhibition. The founding of the London-based 'Cymrodorion', the various stages of 'Celtic Revivalism', the question of Richard Wilson's painting (which ultimately held currency in an English-based landscape school) serve to confuse this issue, and generally have contributed towards the de-centring of the Welsh culture which has occurred.

R.S. Thomas, and the Modern Poetic Vision

i) Politics in Wales inscribes a 'nationalist/left' conflation which denies the simple left/right dichotomy of traditional consumer politics. In order to be truly conservative (with a small 'C' - this is not party politics) in Wales, one must break the law, must be both reactionary and rebellious. Thus, an artist like R.S.Thomas is set free from the usual opposition between 'post-modernism' and 'liberal humanism', between 'Marxism' and 'The Right'. This liberation is to be found in his constant attempts to discover what could be described as the 'post-colonial voice'.

The preservation of the linguistic mode of expression is intertwined with a constant analysis and evaluation of that mode. This also has connotations for poetic practices which come out of this background. The outmoded process of 'Empiricism' in critical

The Minister

(extract)

Narrator
The rhythm of the seasons: wind and rain,
Dryness and heat, and then the wind again,
Always the wind, and rain that is the sadness
We ascribe to nature, who can feel nothing.
The redwings leave, making way for the swallows;
The swallows depart, the redwings are back once more.
But man remains summer and winter through,
Rooting in vain within his dwindling acre.



TWO-TIME WINTER
Acrylic/Acrylic 1995 Donald McIntyre
Name/Size: 20" x 24"
Fabricated/inspired by: THE MINISTER
Collected Poems 1945-1990 (J.M. Dent, 1992) vol. page 42

approaches is condemned in Catherine Belsey's statement that 'Empiricism evades confrontation with its own presuppositions, protects whatever procedures and methods are currently dominant, and so guarantees the very opposite of objectivity'¹⁸. Thomas's poetry is often in the form of a singular 'empirical' account, but it is often an 'empirical' confrontation *with its own* expression; it uses a deliberate understanding of the status of its own language as a departure point. What sets it aside is its consistency as part of a produced (often a painfully foreign) discourse. The poem manages to discover within itself constant self-reflexion, and as a result its cultural positioning leaves it beyond the self-conscious framework of 'Modernism'.

ii) This factor is encapsulated by the effacement of humankind's effectiveness against the force of nature; a method in which Thomas so often uses 'the figure against background' to thwart the 'normal' reading of a poem. Donald McIntyre picks up on a neat illustration of this in his choice of poetry from The Minister:

**The rhythm of the seasons: wind and rain,
Dryness and heat, and then the wind again,
Always the wind, and rain that is the sadness
We ascribe to nature, who can feel nothing...
(See Opposite).**

By use of one monosyllable, 'who', Thomas displaces what could have been an evocative but simple account of nature into a query about exactly what it is that 'we ascribe to nature'. The grammatical ambivalence caused by the dilemma of whether it is 'nature' or 'we' that 'can feel nothing' leads the reader to certain conclusions: if it is 'nature' that can feel nothing, then the word 'who', rather than the use of the correct 'which', signifies our being brought into existence as 'ascribers',

¹⁸Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice, New Accents (London: Methuen, 1980), p42.

At sixty there are still fables
to outgrow, the possessiveness
of language. There is no book
of life with the pen ready
to delete one's name. Judgment
days are the trials we attend
here, whose verdict the future
has no interest in. Is there
a sentence without words?

God
is a mode of prayer; cease
speaking and there is only
the silence. Has he his own
media of communication?

What is a galaxy's meaning?
The stars relay to the waste
places of the earth, as they do
to the towns, but it is
a cold message. There is randomness
at the centre, agitation subsisting
at the heart of what would be
endless peace.

A man's shadow
falls upon rocks that are
millions of years old, and
thought comes to drink at that dark
pool, but goes away thirsty.



Donald McIntyre
The Figure (1961) oil on canvas 1961
Main: 50cm x 40cm (19.7in x 15.7in)
Reproduction permission by McIntyre
Collected Poems 1963-1987 (2nd edn) 1987, vol. 1, page 287

and 'displacers', of 'the sadness'. We are thus inscribed into existence by the poem, and at once invent a 'sadness' which is not really there *a priori*. Tied in with the underlying dichotomy between an 'intrinsic value' and 'value which the reader *brings*' to the poem, this facet of the work exposes two questions and invites a comparison. Firstly, there is a notion here that the poem invents the reader/reinvents the speaker, i.e., *writes back at* the poet. Secondly, there is the philosophical question of whether humankind invents the concept of Nature, or does Nature initiate humankind?

Humankind is signified in 'the figure' in the painting (McIntyre's painting was certainly placed in a position on the layout in St. David's Hall which introduced a run of other paintings incorporating 'figures'). Donald McIntyre's two works are of different seasons, 'Winter' and 'Autumn', but are of exactly the same subject-matter. Does this man, then, with his flat cap, remain 'summer and winter through'? Perhaps his 'dwindling acre' is more reminiscent of Ivor Davies' selection 'Senior' whose final lines remember the transience of man, even the transience of 'the word' *as such*? Witness:

**A man's shadow
falls upon rocks that are
millions of years old, and
thought comes to drink at that dark
pool, but goes away thirsty.
(See Opposite).**

'Senior' is arguably a self-conscious exposition of the process of writing, 'the possessiveness/of language' weighs heavily on the shoulders of the reader; the restrictiveness of artistic form poses the question 'Is there/a sentence without words?' There is a void beyond the given structures of communication which is occupied by an enigmatic God, broadly characteristic in Thomas's work. Even if this God *does*

It will always win.
 Other men will come as I have
 To stand here and beat upon it
 As on a door, and ask for love,
 For compassion, for hatred even: for anything
 Rather than this blank indifference,
 Than the neutrality of its answers, if they can be called, answers
 These grey skies, these wet fields,
 With the wind's winding-sheet upon them.

And endlessly the days go on
 With their business. Lovers make their appearance
 And vanish. The germ finds its way
 From the grass to the snail to the liver to the grass.
 The shadow of the tree falls
 On our acres like a crucifixion,
 With a bird singing in the branches
 What its shrill species has always sung,
 Hammering its notes home
 One by one into our brief flesh.



David Tress: WINTER VALLEY
 Cylchwr cywng ar lapan: mixed media on paper 1995 David Tress
 Main Size: 22" x 30"
 Ffynhonnau gan: Inspired by: THAT
 Collected Poems 1943-1990 (J.M. Dent, 1993, vol. 1 page 206)

have its 'own/media of communication' it is strangely absent here. As with so many other concepts, Thomas suggests these ones - 'God', 'Nature', 'Man' - only to then bring them into question, and turn them around to face their own deconstruction. This alienation is repeated in David Tress's selection 'That' (See **Opposite**), in which the abstract 'it' is the subject-matter, in which the terms 'love', 'compassion', even 'hatred', are manifestations of 'Word', and only 'Word' (i.e. as a concept in itself).

They are arbitrary signifiers, constructions of the observer, and share the same deictic distance from human 'reality' as the title itself does from the object. The poem's 'blank indifference' suggests ultimate answers, and yet subsequently denies them: 'if they can be called, answers/These grey skies'. This is reminiscent of those last lines of 'Senior'; even those who experience the strongest human emotion, the lovers who 'make their appearance/And vanish', only come to signify an irrecoverable transience. The comma which comes after 'if they can be called' deliberately splits the line up into two semantic possibilities, and poses the whole question of what it is to 'call', label, or describe something. The verb is all-important.

iii) Welsh arts aside, Thomas's poetry encodes three main contemporary poetical influences which are seen in his constant preoccupation with the language of his own poems. These are, in the Anglo-centric context, the modernist tradition of Eliot, Yeats, Pound; the contemporary poets of his age: Hughes, Larkin, and (seen in the English context) Dylan Thomas; and his interest in the twentieth century visual arts - impressionism, expressionism, dadaist/surrealism which is illustrated by Ingrowing Thoughts and Between Here and Now. Thus there are at least two (sometimes conflicting) traditions

which constitute the Anglo-Welsh literary background. To exert a concept of comfortable closure on R.S.Thomas, to describe his poetry as simply post-romantic 'nature poetry' leads the argument drastically into a corner. Thomas is primarily concerned with the 'nature of nature' - of course - but the very condition of the poetry's existence lies in the conflicting arguments concerning the chosen 'setting'. As Belinda Humfrey puts it, R.S.Thomas is 'deliberately anti-romantic... the poet sees the dying landscape, the fields reverting to bare moor, but he does not set himself within the landscape'¹⁹. In this sense, his work is strangely akin to the self-destructive nature of the confessional poetry of, for example, Ann Sexton. This 'self-destruction' has been seen as the only means of expression available to the marginalised woman in a patriarchal world²⁰.

Thomas will not see the landscape which he describes in terms of the English-generated 'picturesque' conception, and seems very aware of the mistakes of picturesque precursors such as Gilpin 'who provided the opportunity for the mass consumption of the picturesque. In doing so... he jeopardised the scarce cultural commodity he had done so much to expound'²¹. In this sense, the fact that so much exists in the process of perception and description, in the addressing of subject/object positions is something which makes this Welsh national concept of England peculiarly modern. A contemporary of Thomas, a

¹⁹Belinda Humfrey, 'The Gap In The Hedge: R.S. Thomas's Emblem Poetry', from Miraculous Simplicity, ed. by William V. Davis (Fayetteville: Arkansas Press, 1993), p164. The reason that the poet does not 'set himself within the landscape' may be to do with avoiding the 'arresting' or paralysing 'gaze' of the English/institutional viewpoint.

²⁰Interestingly, the authors of The Empire Writes Back tell us: 'the parallel between the situation of post-colonial writing and feminist writing is striking' (p7).

²¹Copley/Garside(eds), The Politics of the Picturesque, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p177.

fellow countryman and activist, and a person of whom he is very much aware²², is Saunders Lewis. He describes the act of poetry-writing thus:

The matter of poetry is not an unwritten poem in the poet's mind. It is not a completed experience for which the poet has to find adequate symbol. A poem is not the expression of anything already existing, nor of anything that has already occurred unexpressed...When you are making a poem you are aware of two activities, both essential and continuous... It is not that you've got an idea but cannot find the right word for it. It simply is that you haven't yet had the idea, you are suspended, waiting, willing, experimenting, evoking, perhaps by chanting a phrase repeatedly to yourself, fishing for the thing, despairing²³.

iv) The dependence of late twentieth-century art on, above all else, that element of 'process' is something which is echoed in Ted Hughes's poetry again when, for instance, in his poem 'Thrushes'²⁴, the predator exists *only* in action - and so the poetic 'action' also, of course, is verbal. The subject-matter participates in a 'bounce', 'stab', 'devouring of itself'. The poem is about nature, it seems initially, but it then reveals itself, like Thomas's poetry often does, to be about the inescapable cycle of production and devouring in which humankind is engaged, as it creates, expresses, consumes, destroys idea after idea, image after image. Similarly, it is within that 'nexus', that gap between addresser and addressee where closure is denied (or at least abandoned in favour of 'process'), that the 'activity' of the exhibition takes place.

Hughes here uses the *verb* as the centre of expression, reiterating Saunders Lewis's point across a cultural divide. Carrying this technique over into Thomas's work, the verb which is most in evidence is that of 'seeing', 'staring', 'glaring', and general interaction. Indeed, in terms of the 'action' which takes place between thought and vision,

²²R.S. Thomas, 'Saunders Lewis', from *Welsh Airs*, (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1987).

²³Saunders Lewis, 'The Poet', from *The Arts, Artists, and Thinkers, an Enquiry*, ed. by John M. Todd (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1958), p78.

²⁴Ted Hughes, *Lupercal* (London: Faber, 1960).

Anne Price-Owen points out that with respect to Thomas's approach to paintings:

This subtle shifting of thought and image frequently has startling and provocative effects on the reader.

This state of flux cannot be reproduced in the painter's medium where the image is fixed and static. However, it must be stressed that many painters have also been keen to reflect this changing state, by depicting movement in the stillness of their works²⁵.

The concept of 'action' in the form of the *verb* occupies a central position, but shares it, paradoxically enough, with an emptiness. As Belinda Humfrey points out, 'the "great poem" will always be a hole, or gulf, or gap, or a challenge of endless potentiality, because the poet cannot get beyond its "frontier", to find in language his nameless, silent elusive God'²⁶. Thomas's treatment of boundaries, it could be said, is presented in the form of a 'mutual appraisal' which takes place between the figures in his poetry, between the 'personae' (a favourite expression of A.E. Dyson's). He looks to escape the restrictions of this language through involvement in its workings, through the process of 'dialogue', and thus through the necessary elements of 'prospect' or 'point of view'. J.P. Ward says that the 'central characteristic' of the poetry, the 'metaphors', do not tell the (literal) truth, they put matter to work²⁷. Reminiscent of Thomas's problem with language is Roland Barthes's questioning of 'tropes of emptiness which allow us to "discover" new

²⁵ Anne Price-Owen, p62. Indeed, reference to the Ivor Davies interview (trans. 2) will reveal, very interestingly for this entire study, that at least one of the artists actually thought Thomas's readings of these poems 'strange':

The way in which R.S. Thomas responds to the paintings in *Ingrowing Thoughts* and *Between Here and Now* is not the way a painter or art-historian would respond. I'm not saying he got them wrong, but that he has a very eccentric perception of them (in the best way). It was not a 'mainstream' reading of them. He would probably think the same about my painting's interpretation of his poetry. He'd probably think: 'This guy hasn't quite got the point of the poem; there's a perspective here which isn't R.S. Thomas'. Everything's like that. you can never 'describe' an event, only 'interpret' it. (See *Appendix B*, trans. 2)

²⁶ Belinda Humfrey, p169.

²⁷ J.P. Ward, p45.

worlds as if they were either uninhabited or, if not, then at least "uncontaminated" by Western culture. Only 'by avoiding language'²⁸ can the viewer avoid this presumption. So Barthes can be brought directly to bear on the spatial restriction in Thomas's poetry, and Belinda Humfrey's comment that "'emptiness" is an often repeated word' in the poetry, particularly Laboratories of the Spirit(1975), that there is a 'high point of absence' in the poetry, can be tied in with articles such as Peter Lord's 'The Beautiful Empty Space'²⁹ which focusses on the colonisation of landscape through art.

Cultural Incrimination/Caught in 'the Act'

So the question 'Is there/a sentence without words?' from 'Senior' is as relevant to the conception of author and reader as it is to the conception of this 'God Space'. Combined with the fact that 'what the poet sees is "a prospect in the mind" (Wordsworth)³⁰, is the fact that what the poet sees is the 'distant figure'. To complicate this further, what is seen in this 'distant figure' is too often a reflection of the viewer/poet. Emrys Parry's painting of 'The Gap in The Hedge'(1952) in some way re-enacts the grittiness of Iago Prytherch's first appearance and, interestingly, appears at the entrance to the front room of the

²⁸This is a description of Barthes's philosophy in Empire of Signs, (Roland Barthes, Paris: Seuil, 1970) from p36 of the editors' introduction to Writing Worlds. They go on to describe Barthes idea of the travel guides as 'agents of blindness', a term taken from his 'Guide Bleu' chapter in Mythologies, (Paris: Seuil, 1957). It is well worth reading these essays by Barthes against some of the early travelogues which 'depicted' Welsh landscape such as William Owen (Pughe)'s Cambria Depicta (London, 1816).

²⁹Peter Lord, 'The Beautiful Empty Space', from his Gwenllian: Essays on Visual Culture, (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 1994). On p151, Lord says:

In my view, there can be no such thing as an amoral image, although a distinction does need to be made, as far as the artist are concerned, in terms of intent. There are pictures which the artist and the patron (whose vital role is usually forgotten) intend to have specific moral, and therefore ultimately behavioural implications; and then there are those who suppose themselves to be objectivists, whose images convey value systems, only, as it were, by default.

³⁰Belinda Humfrey, p165.

exhibition. This is a possible starting point for viewing (a suggestion which I was taken up on by the Exhibitions Officer at St. David's Hall), and perhaps an apt one, considering, too, the 'act of seeing'³¹ which J.P. Ward considers so fundamental to this poem. J.P. Ward's analysis of 'the figure' in the context of 'The Watcher'(1961) is informative:

This poet finds that he, as an individual and as a poet, is a watcher; that he must watch, that this is the mode of his poetry and that this will not be changed.

Consequently, it seems that Prytherch is not a particular person, nor only a generalisation of persons... Rather, he is a drawing-out of the poet's other self, but through the mode of the others who compel his gaze³².

Leslie Jones speculates about the power given to R.S.Thomas by his position as priest in the community, and sees the poet-priest combination as a potentially dangerous one, particularly in the way the watcher/watched dialectic comes out in the poetry: 'R.S.Thomas is a man that's been left alone, so I wonder what his priesthood was for?'. Jones's painting to accompany the poem 'Girl'(1966) is a very striking one in the exhibition, and it could be said that he has succeeded in capturing the glassy superficiality of skin-tone in an arresting, almost voyeuristic, way.

Girl

And her breath that is like
A vase of flowers, of dead flowers. I take
Her hand with its red nails
In mine, and examine her eyelids'
Mascara, and what is left
Of her brows. And her teeth manage
Some laughter that breaks its china
Upon me.

Ageless girl,
With your propped charm and your sex's
Tinkering with the wind
At the nostril, need you care
What I think? Half the world
Hesitates at its dull prayers,
As its soul skids suddenly on your stocking.



Leslie Jones, *Girl*

³¹J.P. Ward, p14.

³²ibid., p21.

There's no getting round it.
 It's a hell of a thing, he said, and looked grave
 To prove it. What he said was
 The truth. I would make different
 Provision; for such flesh arrange
 Exits down less fiery paths. But the God
 We worship fashions the world
 From such torment, and every creature
 Decorates it with its tribute of blood.



Title: Ah!
 Copy: a chreon/Wax and crayon 1995 Leslie Jones
 Maint/Size: 13" x 18"
 Fidelity/level: gun/Inspired by: AH!
 Piece (Hart Davies, 1966, tuf./page 45)

However, Jones is more interested in talking about the other painting, (**See Opposite**), one in which he brings several different pre-existent entities together, perhaps in a similar methodology to R.S.Thomas's (see also 'Nocturne by Ben Shahn' from *H'm*, 1972):

Shahn wrote one of Dag Hammarskjöld's political statements in the painting - I wrote 'Ah!' Also, that one there is 'Nocturne'. So, in Shahn's view, this picture depicts the threat of the atomic bomb, and the demon (pattern of demon on the sitter's shoulder). I've changed that to the demon 'always on R.S.Thomas's shoulder'. I think that R.S.Thomas does have a demon on his shoulder. He also writes poems which are precise descriptions of paintings. He doesn't take it beyond its picture frame, only his response to the painting. The demon ties in with Thomas's attitude towards industry, and urban society (something which I try to represent with the area of red on the right). So, going within the painting, you have Ben Shahn's painting, then a large canvas where Thomas the author is coming out to write the poem, and in the background is a statement of urban society. So its playing about with two men's ideas, two men's writing.

R: - or maybe three - your own?

L: But I'm only a spectator.³³

The preceding argument questions that role of 'spectator', which, though in conflict with Jones's claim here, ties in with his deep cynicism of 'Thomas-the-Priest' elsewhere. J.P. Ward's analysis of the poetry runs thus: 'The image we take away from reading these poems is that of the priest watching, even staring, at a lone worker in a field and trying to make something of what he sees'³⁴. Ward goes on to mention the poem 'The Watcher'(1961), which runs: '... the men busy/In ways never to be divulged/To the still watcher beyond the glass'. He concludes: 'In "The Watcher" it is the watching itself that is finally grasped'³⁵.

³³see Leslie Jones interview ([Appendix B](#), trans. 4).

³⁴J.P. Ward, p14.

³⁵ibid., p21.

The Moment of Mysticism: the Post-Modern Denied and Enforced

An eclectic mixture of Arnoldian Celtic Mysticism and Romantic Egotism, Modernist Imagism can be traced in the poetry of R.S.Thomas, and arguably now in the Welsh national identity itself. Having brought these influences to the fore, Thomas works subtly and systematically to undermine them, subverting these, and many other 'over-simplistic readings', of his work. He exposes an ambivalence about God which makes comments that he is both self-reflexive and spiritual not surprising. A.E. Dyson, giving it a theological slant, describes it thus:

The mystery of good and evil is, after all, central; and in Thomas it is all the more impressive for not being identified with partly faked or superficial dilemmas such as pre-modern versus modern, civilised versus uncivilised, or even urban versus rural, but rather found in the inner tensions of the people he knows best³⁶

The figure of Iago Prytherch, although obviously identified as a specifically Welsh character, also exists as a figure across cultural/generic/historical boundaries. Prytherch shares his debut, in fact, with the similar figure in 'Taliesin 1952' (An Acre of Land, 1952). This reference to the original shape shifter also puts us in mind of David Jones's recurring figure 'Taliesin'. A.E. Dyson says: 'Iago has an elemental reality and power... this is not unlike Gray's ambiguous feelings for the "unlettered dead" of his "Elegy"³⁷. Dyson goes on: 'The poet more than half identifies with them, or wishes to in their simplicity; yet draws back from the thought of really being unlettered and uncouth himself³⁸. Prytherch's shifting and enigmatic interpretation, which J.P. Ward calls 'curious luminosity'³⁹, benefits simultaneously from both an

³⁶A.E. Dyson, Yeats, Eliot, and R.S. Thomas: Riding the Echo. (London: Macmillan, 1981), p297.

³⁷ibid., p294.

³⁸ibid., p294.

³⁹J.P. Ward, p14.

He kneeled down
 dismissing his orisons
 as inappropriate; one by one
 they came to his lips and were swallowed
 but without bile.
 He fell back
 on an old prayer; Teach me to know
 what to pray for. He
 listened; after the weather of
 his asking, no still, small
 voice, only the parade
 of ghosts, casualties
 of his past intercessions. He
 held out his hands, cupped
 as though to receive blood, leaking
 from life's side. They
 remained dry, as his mouth
 did. But the prayer formed:
 Deliver me from the long drought
 of the mind. Let leaves
 from the deciduous Cross
 fall on us, washing
 us clean, turning our autumn
 to gold by the affluence of their fountain.



Title/Title: THE PRAYER
 Acrylic/Acrylic 1995 Tony Goble
 Main/Size: 22" x 15"
 Ysbydolwyd gan/Inspired by: THE PRAYER
 Collected Poems 1945-1990 (J.M. Dent, 1993, tud./page 270)

'elemental', or 'essentialist' reading, and a 'fluid', Jungian 'mythological child'⁴⁰ character. He may be rendered a mystical symbol of Wales which would 'shatter' if 'touched' by language, or he can be a collective vehicle for all the anxieties of twentieth-century human identity. Ken Edward Smith, on *Pietà* (1967), says that poems like 'Abersoch', 'The Moor', and 'Swifts' are:

the poetry of the eternal moment... As with Ted Hughes, the myths are not the totalising systems of the great Modernists, but varying provisional metaphors that embody the flux of being: attempts to pin R.S. Thomas to one theological structure ignore this key element of the post-modernist process and recycling in his work.⁴¹

Indeed, Thomas's treatment of ontological issues may be used in parallel with questions about subject/object interchange. This is illustrated in Tony Goble's contribution to the exhibition, 'The Prayer', (See Opposite). The poem is again not about the God to which a prayer would be addressed, but about the process of composing that prayer. Also, the words 'Deliver me from the long drought/of the mind' is curiously reminiscent of Eliot's 'Wasteland'. It is interesting to see Goble interpret the poem in a circular sense in his painting, despite the fact that other of Thomas's poems are much more overtly cyclical. In any case, Smith goes on to describe the poetry as 'embracing the transcendent and the mundane in the same vision'⁴². Thomas himself, when compared to others of his time, says:

In Hughes there is a surface brilliance, a verbal power that dazzles but disguises an emptiness underneath - the same with Sylvia Plath. What

⁴⁰This is a link which David Blamires makes between 'The role that Taliesin plays in the Welsh legend' and the Jungian phenomenon which 'has various forms: now a god, giant, Tom Thumb, animal, etc.' (David Blamires, *David Jones, Artist and Writer* (Manchester: 1971), p202). Blamires cites Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (New York: 1959), p161. It is on the same page Blamires talks about Taliesin's 'numinous significance in the twentieth century'. I thought this particularly relevant because of the affiliation between Thomas and Jones pointed out by Ward, who claims that Thomas's 'The Minister' was influenced (as well as by T.S. Eliot) by David Jones's 'The Sleeping Lord'.

⁴¹Ken Edward Smith, p55.

⁴²ibid., p61.

I'm after is to demonstrate that man is spiritual. Even through the machine, man is showing his divine nature. I've been through life in rural Wales and rejoiced in earth, sea, manure. It could be seen as the primitive pagan approach, with man as just another creative part of life⁴³.

From Language to Culture: The State of the Art, and The Practicalities

As a study in English, written by an English man, the perspective of the production of art in Wales in this study shares that same intrinsic counter-productiveness which Brian Morris identifies as characteristic in Thomas's poetry. Its experiment with the rhetoric of escape from the norms of the 'outsider' language can only venture so far. The 'ideological state apparatuses' are engaged within the discourse of *this project itself*, for by proposing a supposedly balanced dialectics, the affordance of a (singular) radical alternative/escape in itself delimits and proposes a social choice, a binary opposition between *dominant* and *marginal*. This ultimately encloses and restricts artistic expression. So 'communication' must play itself into the hands of the controlling (media) institutions. The subversion of artistic norms in Wales serves as much for the liberation of art internationally as it does for the nationalism of Wales itself. However, to create a different/new agenda is to create a new discourse with which to address the boundaries of that social containment, to 'open-up' the arts, to create *a new Wales*.

From a post-colonialist point of view, Iwan Bala and Ivor Davies, most notably, have a practical and pro-active attitude towards the 'imaging' of natural Wales. Davies, having published such articles as the 'Matters Arising' note on Art of Wales: A response to the W.A.C.'s Review of Policies for the National Arts and Media Strategy⁴⁴,

⁴³Timothy Wilson's article in The Guardian, 15th September, 1972, from Critical Writings on R.S. Thomas.

⁴⁴Planet: The Welsh Internationalist, 93, pp112-113.

emphasises the imperial precepts of the English-based 'Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts' (C.E.M.A.), shedding light on the politico-cultural power-base of a central 'Arts Council of Great Britain' (as it has now become):

Even before CEMA, the liberal aristocracy of a puritanical and well-meaning tradition propagated their own values. A missionary spirit had colonised and civilised an empire, discouraging anything undesirable; governors were then replaced by natives who conformed to "British" standards.

Militant and radical this attitude may be, but relevant, too, it transpires.

He continues:

Galleries should primarily be concerned with the encouragement of "indigenous cultural expression", be courageous about the rights of native artists to have retrospective and other exhibitions, thereby cultivating confidence and developing a culture.

Donald Moore, in his essay on 'Museums and Galleries in Wales, 1950-1975' explains some of the complications involved in 'developing a culture' in this way:

Art of any kind must have a patron, and fine art must have a wealthy patron. But patronage has more than one aspect. First, someone has to decide what is to be created; secondly there has to be a consumer to admire the resulting creation; thirdly, someone has to pay for the expense of the creation. But that is not the end: someone has to provide accommodation for what is made. The role of the patron is thus complex, as it would be more accurate to say that several different patrons could be involved in any given transaction.⁴⁵

As a result of the need for patronage, Moore later concludes thus: 'What has really happened in the quarter-century or so covered by this survey?...The work of the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Welsh Arts Council has permeated every sort of artistic activity'. This permeation is seen in a generally positive light by this Welsh Arts Council report, in that these two institutions were supporting Welsh Arts, and attempting to make them more 'mainstream'. Eric Rowan

⁴⁵Meic Stephens(ed.), The Arts in Wales: 1950-1975, chapter 4, (Cardiff: Welsh Arts Council, 1979), p88.

discusses the production of art in Wales during the nineteen-fifties, condemning it, in effect, for its 'inability' to compete with the European/American art market, and seeing 'the international' and 'the nationalistic' as diametrically opposed:

How vital was the kind of painting and sculpture being created and exhibited? The answers to these questions depend on whether one has an international or a nationalistic point of view. By the wider standards of time, the visual arts in Wales were hermetic, even provincial⁴⁶

Perhaps the time of writing (the late 'seventies) explains the not-so-well-established idea that, in the modern world (certainly Europe), a lot can exist in the duality of cultural 'nationalism' or 'national identity', whilst still being financially 'Euro-centric'. Certainly, according to Dafydd ap Iwan, visits to Plas Glyn-y-Weddw are very often made by people who know more of Wales than the English, through themselves being speakers of a European minority language. To accept Rowan's point of view in relation to the Plas Glyn-y-Weddw exhibition would be a betrayal of the most commonly voiced agenda amongst all the artists involved, including the poet himself. This is the objection to the Anglo-centricity encoded in Rowan's presumptions.

From the public patronage/misrepresentation/exclusion perspective, Tom Wolfe (one of Alex Campbell's favourite writers incidentally) wittily queries the power of 'the public' in terms which seem relevant. He, in fact, is referring to art internationally when he writes of:

what is so often described as the lag between "the artist's discoveries" and "public acceptance". Public? The public plays no part in the process whatsoever... The notion that the public accepts or rejects anything in Modern Art, the notion that the public scorns, ignores,

⁴⁶ibid., p60.

fails to comprehend... Art or any individual artist is merely romantic fiction⁴⁷

It is Peter Lord who addresses these social themes, insisting that the English-dominated control of art in Wales misinscribes a consumer for its product, because that product is irrelevant and *dislocated*. Lord condemns the way of thinking illustrated by Rowan, questioning the relevance of the Welsh Arts Council to Wales itself in his book The Aesthetics of Relevance. In fact, the stifling of an indigenous Welsh arts and the complex relationship with, and dependence upon, constant Anglo-centric re-definition is best illustrated by Roland Mathias's synopsis of R.S.Thomas's emergence in the nineteen-fifties and 'sixties:

If, in 1965 or thereabouts nationalism in Anglo-Welsh writing became relatively commonplace, it was the ironic bitterness of the silent years before that had prepared the way. At the same time, it is clear that all this had depended not on what was happening, or could happen, in Wales itself. It was only by means of his[R.S.Thomas's] recognition in London that the English-reading public of the Principality could have learned of their new prophet. With the means of publicity and communication controlled, even inside Wales, by newspapers and journals which took their cue from London there was no other way that the system could work⁴⁸

It is towards a freedom from that 'communication control' - which is, in effect, a culture control/identity control - that Peter Lord's analysis of the above situation is directed. Lord tells us that 'no culture functions without a complex visual language, and so, in the absence of an indigenous tradition, the visual tradition of a competing culture is

⁴⁷Tom Wolfe, The Painted Word (New York: Bantam, 1976), p25. The situation which Prys Morgan describes, which was taking place in eighteenth century Wales, whereby 'Wales did not have a network of learned or academic institutions to check and balance myths and inventions with criticism' (Prys Morgan, 'From Death to a View; The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period' chapter 3 of The Invention of Tradition, ed. by Eric Hobsbaum/Terence Ranger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p99.) is precisely what Dafydd ap Tomos and Peter Lord are making sure is not repeated. The involvement of Glyn-y-Weddw with the public at a local and national scale is something which is unique to minority language culture, and may be rightly cherished.

⁴⁸Roland Mathias, 'Literature in English' from The Arts in Wales: 1950-1975, chapter 7, p216.

introduced⁴⁹. It is not the purpose of this study to investigate the issue of whether or not there has existed an indigenous and autonomous visual arts within Wales, but it is very pertinent that Lord goes on: 'Our lack of confidence disables us from taking our own product as seriously as we take the product of other cultures, both as makers and as consumers'⁵⁰. This 'lack of confidence' has led to allowing the creation of art institutions such as those 'given' to the Welsh by England to be atrociously managed; to be run on the basis of selecting artists who made significant 'contributions to the *British* school of painting'[my italics]⁵¹.

Lord condemns the museums and galleries which have been controlled in the past by centralised/institutional committees for their 'comparative' attitude which ignores the independence of Welsh culture. He describes how these museums and galleries showed only Welsh art which 'mimicked' the aesthetics of English high art. 'Unfortunately', says Lord, 'quality in the minds of the kind of people who were in a position to create such institutions, was identified within high art culture... Its display was not intended to elucidate the indigenous culture but to evaluate the national taste for the benefit of outsiders, and in so doing act as an arbiter of good taste for insiders'⁵².

⁴⁹Peter Lord, *The Aesthetics of Relevance*, ed. by Meic Stephens, (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 1993), p8.

⁵⁰*ibid.*, p8.

⁵¹*ibid.*, p32.

⁵²*ibid.*, p32-33.

Art and Literature Together

i) Tradition

As much as the above statement may be used to support the argument for reinstating of Welsh cultural autonomy, it must also be noted that:

The present looks back at some great figure of an earlier century and wonders, Was he on our side? Was he a goodie? What a lack of self-confidence this implies: the present wants both to patronise the past by adjudicating on its political acceptability, and also to be flattered by it, to be patted on the back and told to keep up the good work⁵³

The historical past and 'cultural autonomy' are issues which are continuously open to discussion. Indeed, David Lowenthal points out that whilst 'remembering is crucial for our sense of identity'⁵⁴, The past is always altered for motives that reflect present needs. We reshape our heritage to make it attractive in modern terms; we seek to make it part of ourselves, and ourselves part of it⁵⁵. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, 'Representing history in relation to the past is no longer a question posed by the historian but by the philosopher. It concerns the manner of *thinking* history rather than historical *knowledge*'⁵⁶.

When all's said and done, it seems that any discussion of the Welsh past must involve the idea of 'the view', of 'vision'. Much of R.S.Thomas's poetry has been described as 'visual', and the Welsh landscape is often the focus of his subject-matter. This is perhaps the area in which the philosophics of his poetry are most hopeful, as the attempt to bridge the gap between 'then' and 'now' is in constant play. In the most popular poem in the Plas Glyn-y-Weddw exhibition, 'Welsh Landscape', Thomas floats, and flaunts this interplay between past and

⁵³Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*, (London: Cape, 1984), p130.

⁵⁴David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p197.

⁵⁵ibid., p348.

⁵⁶Paul Ricoeur, *The Reality of the Historical Past*, (Milwaukee: 1984), p2.

Welsh Landscape

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.
It is to be aware,
Above the noisy tractor
And hum of the machine
Of strife in the strung woods,
Vibrant with sped arrows.
You cannot live in the present,
At least not in Wales.
There is the language for instance,
The soft consonants
Strange to the ear.
There are cries in the dark at night
As owls answer the moon,
And thick ambush of shadows,
Hushed at the fields' corners.
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 carcass of an old song.



Title: WELSH LANDSCAPE
Olew/Oil 1995 Emrys Parry
Maint/Size: 36" x 24"
Ysbrydolwyd gan/Inspired by: WELSH LANDSCAPE
Collected Poems 1945-1990 (J.M. Dent, 1993, tud./page 37)

future. His words: 'you cannot live in the present./At least not in Wales', have both negative *and* positive connotations. On the one hand, the Welsh identity, so well characterised by the alienated feel of the poem - the half-light features of the subject-matter - must not be sought in the 'noisy tractor/And the hum of the machine', but in the awareness 'above' these things. There is a paradoxical glory signified in the poem by the centrally-occurring, but contradictory, juxtaposition of the adjectives 'soft' and 'strange', whose assonance in the lines 'The soft consonants/Strange to the ear' lends an ethereal phoneticism to the piece.

The poem is ultimately about decay, and this is brought to full symbolism in the second part. However, the neo-gothic fascination with the 'Wind-bitten towers and castles/With sham ghosts' both sets-up, and lets-down, the imagination, recreating new concepts out of old, reminding us that where the past dies, the future is born. The ambivalent 'mouldering', this 'life-in-death', is picked-up on by Emrys Parry's composition (which shares the title). The earthy theme of decay is explored in an elemental way through the symbol of the corpse. Although an abstract piece, it re-enacts the hinting denial found in the poem, of contact - through the 'carcass' - between death and life, earth and sky, landscape and history, death and rebirth. Sensibly enough, this is one of the opening works in the catalogue. (See **Opposite**).

There are certain institutions which Thomas is no doubt aware of: the Llywarch Hen poems, the Mabinogi, the writings of Thomas Pennant, Pugh, Gray's The Bard, even Wilson's painting, amongst others. To see the works only in the light of the above would be to ignore the main motivation of Thomas's poetry, which is surely the issue of a muffled voice, the issue of the inability to 'speak', the issue of

'language'. Saying that Thomas must necessarily be influenced by Welsh tradition is not to say that this tradition is well-defined or clear-cut.

The complexity of access to the Welsh past is interestingly discussed by Prys Morgan as 'From Death to a View; The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period'⁵⁷, and reveals some of the problematics involved in the historical identity of the Welsh. Iago Prytherch's enigmatic appearances are infinitely complicated by these notions of self-definition, and Morgan traces the 'bridling' of Wales's historical personality by the English at least as far back as Henry Tudor⁵⁸. With paradox worthy of Thomas himself, it may be registered at this point that his poetry, whilst giving rise to this cultural and linguistic angst, simultaneously will deal harshly with a straightforward and simplistic anti-imperialist attitude. He impresses upon his audience that, for instance, nature is 'an ever-renewed/symphony to be likened to/admiringly, even as we perform/it on whatever instruments/the generations put into our hands' ('Andante', from Experimenting with an Amen, 1986). J.P. Ward's statement that 'from the start Thomas tried to

⁵⁷Prys Morgan, 'From Death to a View; The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period'. Briefly, it is interesting to compare his cynical mention of the deliberate proliferation of the Cantre'r Gwaelod legend with Iwan Bala's positive reworking of it. 'It's a metaphor for language, a metaphor for culture. This apathy of the watchman has let the water drown a culture, a people, and a "voice".' (see Iwan Bala interview, Appendix B, trans. 1). Both Bala and Davies are interested in reworking the tradition, regardless of whether it is 'inherently authentic'; and also in flying in the face of the supposition that anything which is political is culturally specific, and therefore not 'universal'. Morgan, however, talks about Cantre'r Gwaelod in these terms:

T.J. Pritchard was in fact part of a wide movement which tried to make the Welsh understand that their landscape must be cherished, and in order to make this clear to common folk gave each stick and stone historical and human interest. One of Pritchard's poems was 'The Land Beneath the Sea', about Cantre'r Gwaelod, the Lowland Hundred which lay under Cardigan bay...(p86).

Morgan talks about this in the context of the Beddgelert myth (the unjustly murdered faithful dog, Gelert, supposedly buried at the village of that name), which was:

a clever adaptation of a well-known international folk-tale. It is a good instance of the kind of complex myth-making which went on in a thousand places.(p86)

⁵⁸ibid., p46.

write an Anglo-Welsh poetry based on the heritage of the real Wales⁵⁹ may not be a statement of the obvious, but an indication of the attempt to escape the English and Welsh dichotomy which his poetry tackles.

ii) The Modern Question

Like David Jones (also a contemporary of Thomas's) who, according to Eric Rowan, 'owed no allegiance to any movement... remained immune to the infectious spread of those new ideas that characterised the post-war years'⁶⁰, Thomas may not be pinned down to any singular literary tradition such as that known as the 'modernist' school. Perhaps it is to their credit that this is so, as neither Jones nor Thomas seems to fall into the category of what Lord calls 'those Welsh intellectuals who were so desperately keen to establish the worthiness of their nation as a contributor to British imperial greatness'⁶¹. Then again, as Roland Mathias comprehensively documents, with respect to R.S. Thomas's rise to fame:

If, in 1965 or thereabouts, nationalism in Anglo-Welsh writing became relatively commonplace, it was the ironic bitterness of the silent years before that had prepared the way. At the same time, it is clear that all this had depended not on what was happening, or could happen, in Wales itself. It was only by means of his recognition in London that the English-reading public of the Principality could have learned of their new prophet. With the means of publicity and

⁵⁹J.P. Ward, p28.

⁶⁰Eric Rowan, 'The Visual Arts' chapter of *The Arts in Wales: 1950-1975*, p60. Ceri Richards is described in the same way by Eric Rowan: 'The tide of modern art passed over him and he was never affected by the new movements such as Pop Art and Hard Edge Painting'(p57). I leave discussion of where artists like these stand in relation to accepted 'mainstream' art to critics like Peter Lord, or, for that matter, Tom Wolfe.

⁶¹Peter Lord, 'The Myth of Richard Wilson' chapter of *Gwenllian: Essays on Visual Culture*, p160. On the subject of 'modernism' the reader is very much encouraged to refer to the *David Woodford* interview, in which Woodford argues a non-post-modern denial of twentieth century art. Woodford has a very outspoken opinion on the nature of art ('he's certainly thought about it', says Lord) - at least, he sees the discussion of what is 'art' and what isn't as relevant. His point of view consists in a subtle and removed approach. He elucidates in his essay 'A Place in the Mind', in his catalogue to the *Oriel Ynys Mon* exhibition, (Oriel Ynys Mon, 1994).

communication controlled, even inside Wales, by newspapers and journals which took their cue from London, there was no other way that the system could work⁶².

However much of a bewildered state this point puts the arts in Wales into, it decisively reminds us of the near-impossibility of a true escape from the English gaze. The walls of the prison are constructed from the socio-political factor of the English language itself. Thomas's awareness of how the language perpetually contains and delimits his radical potential is all too apparent, for instance, in the frustrated 'scorn he lavishes on invading tourists'⁶³.

Peter Lord's conception of how the Welsh have been 'imaged' in the past is worth mentioning here:

The questions raised by eighteenth century tourism... tie in with the period of the "national movement", between eighteen seventy and nineteen fourteen. It's not so much the Celtic aspect, because O.M. Edwards and Tom Ellis, for instance, were very much "Modernists", and were interested in presenting a new image of Wales as a modern and progressive nation. The way Wales was "imaged" was almost entirely constructed as an image of rural Wales (despite the fact that more than two thirds of its inhabitants at this point lived in an industrial environment)⁶⁴.

So there was a high romantic 'insider' perspective at this time. This type of 'Modernism' may well be comparable to R.S.Thomas's image of 'The Figure Rooted', and opens a very interesting discussion.

⁶²Roland Mathias, 'Literature in English' chapter of *The Arts in Wales: 1950-1975*, p216.

⁶³This is a quotation from Timothy Wilson's article in *The Guardian*, 15th September, 1972. It reappears in *Critical Writings on R.S. Thomas*, p68. Wilson goes on to quote what R.S. Thomas says about 'The Small Window' (see Gwyneth Tomos). Of english tourists he says they are:

'symbols - they have the power to disrupt, they come in their numbers, they destroy what they are looking for. I expressed it in a poem, 'The Small Window'. Wales is a small country - its quietness and beauty can't be thrown open to the masses. When you see people sitting on these rocks with their transistor radios, smoking and reading newspapers, it becomes a trivialisation of life... they can't see birds, butterflies, archaeological remains - they haven't got that kind of awareness. So they fall back on what modern life provides to fill the gap - the jabber of the radio, the press, the plastic world(p69).

This is, in some ways, reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's views on educational awareness (see 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', from *The Egoist*, 1919).

⁶⁴From an interview with him on 5th July, Aberystwyth.

It certainly queries the normal parameters of 'Modernism' as seen in *English* literature. A review of The National Eisteddfod Art and Industrial Exhibition of 1866 by The Times reads:

All the progress and civilisation in Wales has come from England, and a sensible Welshman would direct all his endeavours towards inducing his countrymen to appreciate their neighbours instead of themselves⁶⁵.

This is the type of attitude with which 'reformers' of this period had to contend, so 'modernism' in Wales consisted in that curious blend which Peter Lord describes above.

The Poems and their Paintings. R.S. Thomas's Poetry, and the 'watching figure'

In order to assess a combination of 'multi-media' art such as that on display at Plas Glyn-y-Weddw, it is necessary to envisage a number of different networks which link the verbal and plastic arts in an 'ekphrastic' poetics. There are certain elementary blueprints that may be employed: the relationship of painting to poem may consist of a direct 'transposition', from one medium to another⁶⁶, or, on the other hand, the relationship may be far from close visual representation, for instance, a complete and deliberate departure from the 'obvious' interpretation. This spectrum of different possibilities can contain concepts of visual mimesis, enactments of style or structure etc. It is given further potential by the nature of the poetry itself, what A.E. Dyson describes as 'the dialectic between poem and poem', in other words, 'the

⁶⁵Cited by Peter Lord, chapter 3 of The Aesthetics of Relevance.

⁶⁶The broad term 'illustration' is too often confused with the process of 'transposition' from one medium to another, with negative undertones. However, the concept of the term 'illustration' must not be reduced to this; the subject of its definition evoking a whole new discussion in itself.

You would think sometimes that summer never comes
 To the farmer in his fields, stripped by the wind
 To the blue bone, or impotent with snow.
 You have become used to his ascetic form
 Moving within its cell of leafless trees.
 Not so; his blood uncurls with the slow sap.
 Stretching itself among its sinuous boughs;
 His blood grows hot, the singing cloak of flies,
 Worn each day, bears witness; the stones ring
 Fierce echoes of his heat; he meets himself
 Everywhere in the smell of the ripe earth.



Teitl/Title: WINTER
Dyfiliw/Watercolour: 1995 *William Selwyn*
Maint/Size: 21" x 13"
Ysbydolwyd gan/Inspired by: SUMMER from *An acre of land*.
 (Montgomeryshire Printing Co., Newtown, 1952. tud./page 30)
Slide by: Peter Underwood

possibility of two seemingly wholly different interpretations contained in the same one artefact⁶⁷.

It is, of course, only a part of the greater whole which is the concept of 'post-modernism'⁶⁸, and should not be confused with it. The idea to set up a contrast to the initial piece of art is, of course, still dependent on an established and singular 'reading'. Once Barthes's idea of the 'Death of the Author' is completely absorbed, the validity of authorial 'intent' is not only in question, but in some ways irrelevant, and this reading becomes *plural*: the work becomes open to any *and indeed all* interpretations, each as valid as the next. This new spectrum of possibilities is again as broad as it is long, reaching across various disciplines. In its moment, amongst other things, is the destruction of singular and exclusive artistic canon. However, this is not to say that it does not depend upon established thought for its own objectivity. Its 'departure' is checked by the fact that it is, in itself, born out of accepted artistic tenets.

Thus, in the light of all this, it is with some degree of anarchic pleasure that I point out the currency of William Selwyn's methods of direct and simple 'illustration'. (See **Opposite**). His practice, as well as comprising a uniquely beautiful evocation of the poetry⁶⁹ may be critically attributed as much hermeneutic and artistic value as any notion

⁶⁷A.E. Dyson, p305.

⁶⁸The 'obviousness' of the 'standard' interpretation is conditioned by a 'given' idea of social hierarchy which has been ideologically prescribed by 'ruling class', a post-Marxist critique would claim. This has given rise to the adjectives 'bourgeois', and 'tyrannical' from the post-structuralist school, for instance, when referring to any set of values which does not constantly question its own existence. A condition of post-modernism, says Frederic Jameson, on p15 of his foreword to The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (by Jean-Francois Lyotard, trans: Geoff Bennington and Brian Massimi, Manchester, 1986.), is 'The breaking up of the Grand Narratives' in our society'. N.B. The 'Grand Narrative' is seen as the product of a society which is politically and ideologically driven. 'Dissent' from a socially 'progressive' narrative is social dissent, etc.

⁶⁹'Summer' (1952) - which he accompanies with the perhaps tellingly entitled painting 'Winter', and 'The Lonely Farmer'(1952).

of a new, self-consciously radical, or 'alternative' art-work. As Leslie Jones, a fellow trained illustrator says,

When you illustrate books, you either draw what you're told to draw, or you comment about what you read. No artist, as an illustrator, may depart from the fact that they are the 'poet's illustrator'. I liked Iwan Bala's work, and I told him I was glad *one* of us had been "the poet". (trans. 4).

There are infinite processes of critical distancing which are on offer through the 'Post-Modern' modality. Selwyn's approach can be seen as similar to Iwan Bala's 'invigorating', or Gwyneth Tomos's 'ironic' commentary in its radical potential. Indeed, it would be an invocation of that 'singularity of interpretation' which is supposedly now obsolete, not to mention a denial of artistic splendour, to see the traditional style of Selwyn as 'inexplorative'. One may quite easily apply some of the kitsch irony of Gwyneth Tomos to these paintings, and enter into a completely different poetics - one which, arguably, has been pre-ordained in any case by the dramatics of Thomas's poetry itself.

This area is explored by Leslie Jones's open admission of plagiarism concerning the paintings of Ben Shahn. (See Above). Here, Jones has not only illustrated a previous text, he has copied it, in order to bring it together with another in a new context. There are at least two new factors he has managed to bring to bear in the creation of this new work of art. One involves the juxtaposition of the two paintings - their emerging, and position within a frame *as a new painting*. The second involves the use of the poem itself to provide yet another radical context. In fact, for those who are not familiar with Ben Shahn's work, this will be the abiding impression of what it is about. Is it thus relevant to talk of 'accuracy' under these circumstances?

Bringing this, in fact, to bear on Thomas's poetry, it is interesting to point out that there have been a wealth of readings of the

poems from an ecclesiastical, theological or ontological viewpoint. However, it is equally as productive to read it in the literary context of Thomas's contemporaries. Edward Larrissey exemplifies a modern attitude towards poetry by quoting the poetry of the American, John Ashberry. In late twentieth century literature, says Larrissey, 'every cultural fact is on a level with any other'⁷⁰. Could this be what confuses Thomas's enigmatic relationship with his creation Iago Prytherch?

Certainly, many of the views of the artists represented in the exhibition enact the views of Thomas in their attitude towards art and culture. It might not be that far-fetched to say that there is an element of Iago Prytherch within their attitudes towards space, seeing, understanding, and being 'seen', given that the visual arts in Wales have always had an explicitly close relationship with their practical surroundings. Landscape, topography, painting and bardry, for instance, are interdependent in a unique way. On the level of art in the community, Ivor Davies's and Peter Lord's concern with the display and exhibition of Welsh art is fundamental to the discussion of this exhibition, and it is no mere coincidence that Iwan Bala, also an exhibitor in the gallery, says:

I have the idea here of people living on this peninsula surrounded by the mountains and the sea, and this little world squashed/crushed between two things, and geography affecting people's "mentality". "Cross-fruitfulness" like this is a good thing in opening-out the arts in Wales and bringing ideas together; possibly, the ideas are more important than the pictures being shown.⁷¹

Bala's own preoccupation with 'place' is illustrated in his accompanying leaflet to a Spring exhibition in Aberystwyth Arts Centre,

⁷⁰Larrissey's use of this phrase is in fact in connection with a description of Ashberry's 'Daffy Duck in Hollywood' (*Houseboat Days*, New York, 1977), where it denotes Daffy's idea of 'Hell'. Taken from *Reading Twentieth Century Poetry*, *ibid.*, p176.

⁷¹Robyn Tomos, 'R.S. yn yr Oriol' ('R.S. in the Gallery') - on the exhibition at Plas Glyn-y-Weddw. *Golwg* (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, June 15, 1995), p19.

entitled: Things Change: A brief statement on recent work, in which he homes in on 'one painting in particular, "Meeting Place", and goes on to describe a recent exhibition of verbal and visual arts:

Whilst exploring the particular meaning of "Hiraeth"[trans: "Longing" - the title of the previous exhibition] to the Welsh, the paintings and accompanying theatre piece by Edward Thomas attempted to deal with the sense of displacement, both physical and emotional, that is created from forming new lives in different places to "home".

Time and Place: The Here and Now

Iwan Bala's maxim that 'construction of the paintings meant a layering of past with present', ties in with the idea that 'a state of "limbo" is created, as if one is constantly "in-transit" and never "home". Between the exotic and the familiar, between places real or imagined, between the glass and the canvas'. The three-dimensionality of his paintings can be seen in the two on show at the Plas Glyn-y-Weddw exhibition, and the statement that 'THINGS CHANGE, paintings begin to assert their own geo-geography, begin to map the terrain of this imagined place, this limboland, and make of it a home'⁷² encapsulates a good departure-point for examination of his involvement with this R.S.Thomas's work. This leans towards the dialectic between how a landscape is 'imaged', how it is 'made up' by conditioning and proliferating a presupposition about what should be in there, then pointing it out to the consumer of the idea, as if it 'confirms' or 'fulfils' the universality of that idea. This illusion of 'topographical closure', which has led to the circular process of landscape creation, representation in pictures, then a proliferation of the same artificial relationship of human to nature, raises the questions: 'How authentic is

⁷²Iwan Bala, Things Change: A Brief Statement on Recent Work (Aberystwyth: Aberystwyth Arts Centre, 1994), p2.

this interaction?', and 'Does it affront or marginalise a real sense of indigenous culture?'

In the first chapter of the Hiraeth catalogue, Fintan O'Toole describes the mapping of New South Wales in 1770 by Captain Cook⁷³. This article elucidates a current concern in certain quarters with the idea of a 'palimpsest' - 'a manuscript on which the original material has been over-written or over-painted, but sometimes shows through in odd, barely discernible fragments'⁷⁴. This is actually a description of a completely separate work of art, something which is actually very contemporary with the nineteen-nineties, but the 'deliberate confusion of memory and invention' in this happens in the same self-conscious way in Thomas's poetry. In terms of method, it is interesting to note that Anne Price-Owen describes Thomas's poetry thus:

by way of this poetic medium, words, he[R.S.Thomas] can produce a series of visual images whereby one appears to dissolve into the next, just as one thought is superimposed on another⁷⁵.

This effect can be actively juxtaposed with something Eric Rowan describes in the work of Beauchamp, one of the 56 Group Wales, whose work was 'almost entirely cerebral [as opposed to 'representative'/referential]. He uses glass and metal in severe, geometrical configurations, relying on the quality of the materials and their intrinsic aesthetic appeal'⁷⁶. Looking at, for instance, Iwan Bala's 'A Land', it has to be said that (given that he is aware of the work of Beauchamp) he is influenced by these ideas. If so, then this is proof of

⁷³Coincidentally enough, considering Thomas's poem on Cooke's last voyage in Ingrowing Thoughts, is the fact that Captain Cook's doctor, who was also the witness of his death, was one David Samwell, was also a bard and great friend of 'Iolo Morgannwg'. Prys Morgan tells us that 'Iolo' was 'delighted by the idyllic picture given him of peaceful native life in Polynesia, see p64 of The Invention of Tradition.

⁷⁴Fintan O'Toole, Hiraeth, p10.

⁷⁵Anne Price-Owen, Planet 73, p62.

⁷⁶The Visual Arts' chapter in The Arts in Wales: 1950-1975.

the emergence of a school of Welsh art which is, to all intents and purposes, exclusive property of Wales. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that James Turner's comment on seventeenth century landscape can still be successfully applied to this work of Bala's: "Land", and "Place" are equivalent to "propriety" - meaning in seventeenth century English both *property* and *knowing one's place*... place is identity⁷⁷.

The 'alternative narrative' offered by Bala's work is discussed by him in the interview with him (See Appendix B, trans. 1), but a discussion of this narrative in terms of the relation of image to text is perhaps called for, here. Certainly, in terms of the poetry in question, The poet sees without what he has within. The landscapes are of the mind's eye, the mind's gallery (and the real Wales is forgotten). A distant figure in a landscape becomes a portrait in a frame⁷⁸. Bala's references to the mountains, or islands (he was comfortably ambiguous) in his paintings tie in with ideas about 'prospect theory' voiced by Jay Appleton, and suggestions to this effect were received favourably. Appleton expounds:

towers may be seen to be powerful indirect prospect symbols; their whole design and structure is aimed at expressing elevation above the surrounding country... Off-shore islands might suggest viewpoints from which a wider view of the coastline might reasonably be expected⁷⁹.

The underlying discussion of the dialogue between 'seer' and 'seen' in the poetry might logically be tied in with the discussion of complementary narratives here. Barthes's description of structural narrative runs thus:

Narrative thus appears as a succession of tightly interlocking mediate and immediate elements; dystaxia determines a 'horizontal' reading, while integration superimposes a 'vertical' reading: there is a lot of

⁷⁷James Turner, The Politics of Landscape. (Blackwell, Oxford; 1979), p5.

⁷⁸Belinda Humfrey, p167.

⁷⁹Jay Appleton, The Experience of Landscape, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975) p90.

A Land

Their souls are something smaller
than the mountain above them
and give them more trouble.
They are not touched
either by the sun rising at morning
or the sun setting at evening.
They are all in shadow
pale and winding themselves about each other
inhibiting growth.

Death lives in this village, the ambulance plies
back and fore,
and they look at it through the eternal downpour
of their tears.
Who was it found
truth's pebble in the stripling
river? No one believed him.

They have hard hands that money adheres
to like the scales
of some hideous disease, so that they grizzle
as it is picked off. And the chapel crouches,
a stone monster, waiting to spring,
waiting with the disinfectant of its language
for the bodies rotting with
their unsaid prayers.
It is at such times
that they sing, not music
so much as the sound of a nation
rending itself, fierce with all the promise
of a beauty that might have been theirs.



Title: A LAND
Medium: Pastel ar gynyfias/Emulsion perspex 1995 Iwan Bala
Size: 30" x 26"
Inspired by: A LAND
Collected Poems 1945-1990 (J.M. Dent, 1993, rhd./page 465)
Slide by: Pat Althie

structural "limping", an incessant play of potentials whose varying falls give the narrative its dynamism or energy: each unit is perceived at once in its surfacing and in its depth and it is thus that the narrative "works"⁸⁰.

In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue (see [Appendix A](#)), M. Wynn Thomas calls the poem 'A Land', (See [Opposite](#)), 'an unsparing indictment of a self-rending people', and indeed Bala's blanking-out of certain areas of perspex with splodges of black paint enacts the theme of 'inhibiting growth' and cultural 'dystaxia' in the poem. Bala's positioning of detail 'off-centre' in the painting ties in with the child-like portrayals of 'the stripling river', and 'the chapel' which is 'a stone monster', to give a general sense of unease. The 'disinfectant of its language', referring to the chapel, links up with one of Thomas's attitudes towards the church in general as seen in Roland Mathias's description of his 'conviction that it was the Puritan heritage, as much as anything, which had brought Wales so low... he refers in 'The Minister' to Protestantism as "... the adroit castrator/Of art; the bitter negation/Of song and dance and the heart's innocent joy"⁸¹. This also may be found in Bala's painting in the almost predatory smooth liquid whiteness of the 'hump' at the bottom of the picture, where also the paint appears as liquid. Does the painting process, by crystallising a landscape, disinfect it? Perhaps the crux of his 'narrative message' lies in

⁸⁰Roland Barthes, 'The Structural Analysis of Narratives' from [Image, Music, Text](#), (London: Fontana, 1977), p122.

⁸¹Roland Mathias, 'Literature in English' chapter, from [The Arts in Wales: 1950-1975](#), p217. This dualistic attitude towards the church in Wales is echoed by artists such as Maredudd ap Iestyn, and its origins are exposed by Prys Morgan who, on p44 of [The Invention of Tradition](#), quotes [The Bardic Museum](#), pxvi (by Edward Jones, London, 1802):

The sudden decline of the national Minstrelsy, and Customs of Wales, is in a great degree to be attributed to the fanatic impostors, or illiterate plebeian preachers, who have too often been suffered to over-run the country, misleading the greater part of the common people, from their lawful church; and dissuading them from their innocent amusements, such as Singing, Dancing, and other rural Sports and Games... the consequence is, Wales, which was formerly one of the merriest, and happiest countries in the world, is now become one of the dullest.

the great blanks of canvas which encroach on the humans. Is the viewer incriminated if this argument holds water as I have implied earlier? If brought to bear on the poem, they could signify the blank templates of emptiness discussed earlier which an observer habitually stamps with his/her specific prospect. Maybe I am imposing my 'prospect', here, by discussing the painting at all...

The imposition of 'prospect' is something which is followed up in Bala's other selection, 'Expatriates'(1958), in which he also physically imposes the poem on (by including it in) the painting. The format of words-as-image is also to be found in Leslie Jones's 'Ah!', and Tony Goble's 'The Prayer' amongst others, and it would be pertinent to propose that, if the exhibition were re-mounted, the traditional gallery relationship between 'imaged word' and 'imaged picture' be played around with. This could be done by, for instance, framing the poetry and mounting the picture directly onto the wall, having the poem on a much larger scale than the picture etc. Bala has obviously attempted to broach this issue, and the methods of *layering* in his work also bring attention to the dimensionality of art. What Tom Wolfe calls 'flatness principle'⁸² in modern art is played off in 'Expatriates' against the pithy materiality of the Welsh 'black heart/Under a smooth skin/Sallow as velum; sharp/Of bone and wit that is turned/As a knife against us'. Wolfe condemns the esoteric opacity of modern art in his entertaining analysis, saying 'In short, the new order of things in the art world was: first you get the Word, and then you can see'⁸³. Bala attempts to combine notions of modern abstraction with historical mysticism - the painting points to the poem, the poem to the painting.

⁸²Tom Wolfe, p65.

⁸³ibid., p38.

Bringing to the fore the 'connotative'/denotative' picture again is Tony Goble. His reference to Baudelaire, an acknowledged influence on Thomas, evokes a grotesqueness through both intertextuality and through reference to the poem. The 'parade/of ghosts, casualties/of his past intercessions' is something which it is possible to 'read into' the painting, especially in the light of Baudelaire's own comment that the 'grotesque is an extravagant explosion, so to speak, within the expression'⁸⁴. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, again on this subject, says that:

The quality of grotesqueness arises not so much from the specific contents of the image as from the fact that it refuses to be taken in whole because it embodies a confusion of type... "Grotesque" is a word for this paralysis of language.⁸⁵

Perhaps there lies dormant here a possible discussion of the grotesque in Thomas's poetry? Certainly, the fact that 'we can deform an image, creating a grotesque by slotting it into the wrong category, or even by applying the wrong kind of conceptual scheme altogether'⁸⁶ is pertinent to, for instance, Gwyneth Tomos's 'The Small Window'.

It remains to conclude that every exhibition is underpinned, whether overtly or covertly, by the ideologies of its creators. It has a life of its own as a piece of art, or 'installation', and as such, has to operate according to one agenda or another. It cannot be impartial, but only gains partiality through being 'viewed'.

⁸⁴Baudelaire on 'Some Foreign Caricaturists', cited by Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On The Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton, 1982), p8.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p6.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p12.

Proposals for the Improvement of the Plas Glyn-y-Weddw
Exhibition/An Alternative Way of Looking

The first thing to notice about the above account of the exhibition is the amount of time I have spent on the visual presence of the paintings. As I have mentioned, the exhibition is set out in a comfortable visual way; the eye receives the painting, travels to the poem in order to structure the rest of the pictorial experience.

However, despite the efforts of some of the artists to subvert the usual relationship between text and image by, for instance, incorporating a poem into the picture, presenting a painting with a title contrary to that of the poem, or departing tenaciously from the obvious subject-matter of the poem, we are at no point encouraged (by the layout) to question the respective statuses of poem and picture. It could have been interesting, for instance, to try framing some of the poems *as if they were paintings* (a concrete poem idea, perhaps), or have a poem very large on the wall with a painting visually subordinate - just to confuse that presumption of 'what-is-explaining-what'. One could subsequently experiment with the 'flatness' of the painted image, and the represented three-dimensionality of the poem. It would be fun to paint straight onto the wall, for instance.

Proposals for the improvement of the exhibition are plentiful, and the possibilities are only really restricted by the budget-range. Thus, the only realistic way to look at an improvement policy is through two approaches: the first is a series of ideas to expand the scope of the exhibition to instalment proportions, regardless of budget; the second is the real context, which is that of a modest budget and a meagre supply of man-hours. Since the exhibition has been disbanded at Plas Glyn-y-Weddw, I have had the unique opportunity of not only watching it being 'hung' at St. David's Hall in Cardiff, but actually participating,

voluntarily and in an advisory capacity, in its layout. Whilst working alongside Gaynor Hill, 'Exhibitions Officer', I was able to put some of my ideas into practise. Bringing paintings together with the poems was my role, and I found myself constantly imagining the possibilities of a multi-media based exhibition.

The taped interviews with the artists could have been supplied through a headset, next to each poem, a Public Address system could have been used for sound-effects. Better still was the idea to play back one of the R.S.Thomas audio discs available from retailers. Sepia cinematic film (of old footage) projected onto a wall would perhaps overkill the theme, but if the man-hours were available to organise a sponsor such as one of the major local audio companies (e.g. Sony, Panasonic), it could have opened the exhibition up. Some of these ideas were feasible within the budget available, but the exhibition was constricted by its being but one of the five on display in the venue under the umbrella of Fun, Fable, and Fantasy.

Back down to earth, the really acceptable approach to the exhibition is along the historical, literary, cultural, and artistic avenues or narrative pathways which have been outlined. Alex Campbell has pointed out two possible improvements on the exhibition. The first is to have a photograph of all the artists at the opening, the second to have a special edition raffle. The absence of a singular narrative in the exhibition could have been remedied, and a more labyrinthine layout could have made use of modern multi-media display technology. However, this was not an 'installation' exhibition, and, as an 'Art gallery' in the traditional sense of the term, benefited too from having a more 'indexical' framework. As I hope to have indicated by the large index to this study itself, there is a large variety of information to be indexed. I

have covered a very scant cross-section of the artists involved, and have still had to drastically abridge the material gathered.

Improvement ideas for the exhibition often can meander into the realms of 'improvement ideas for the culture', and so on. On this subject, Dafydd ap Tomos is very interesting. He has a very strong concept of the indigenous or autonomous Welsh art tradition which Peter Lord hints at. Tomos's belief is that there is a particular style in Welsh art - in which images have a raw weight about them, and use large areas of heavy colour - which English people just would not buy. The Welsh, he claims, can deal with the imposing qualities of this style. After all, he, if anyone, is monitoring who the buyers are. If Plas Glyn-y-Weddw survives through its current difficulties, Dafydd's ambition is to set up a full exhibition, fundamentally Welsh, but pulling in international artists whose work fits in well, to illustrate and exhibit this 'school'.

To Conclude

Some of my final points are about how I think this research could be improved and expanded upon. Of course, I would have liked to talk to all of the artists involved, but more specifically in relation to Welsh painting style, David Tress and Tony Goble. Dafydd ap Tomos, amongst others, reveres the talents of Tress, claiming that he is the one artist in Wales who is really testing the traditional boundaries. Despite the fact that Tress is English-speaking, Tomos would almost certainly include him in his 'ideal exhibition', and, by the looks of it, his current style would complement Tomos's concept of the 'Cymru-centric' tradition nicely. The question of contemporary art in Wales, along with many others, is something which could be expanded upon if there were more time, space, and resources, but I hope to have shown how the

exhibition is a 'hypertext' through which this field may be referenced. The complex positioning of attitudes to arts and culture in Wales seems to indicate that a bi-polar 'insider/outsider' whilst being the obvious model of approach must be viewed with considerations. These considerations may be witnessed through the differences which the artists expressed in interview.

Having mentioned above David Woodford's suggestion that the artists could have been given a clearer 'structure', it should be noted that R.S.Thomas himself was initially asked to suggest poems, and flatly refused. There are a few further points with which to conclude this study. They are brought to light by Thomas's attitudes to the exhibition. Thomas spared no time in expressing his disapproval of the *idea* of this: 'I don't think you can paint poems. It's one medium trying to imitate another... it's a kind of pastiche. I myself have done it'. However, the poet didn't want to 'throw cold water on' the exhibition because of his general affiliation with the gallery.

When questioned further on the topic of poetry and painting, however, he admitted:

W.B.Yeats said that the only justification for translating poetry was that you produced a good poem, and you don't necessarily have to translate word for word; its a kind of abstraction. As long as I can make a *good* poem, this is, I suppose, a justification... If you can abstract from a poem in another language, then make a good poem in your own language, it is a justification. Its the same with painting - if you can make a good poem, based on a painting, that is a justification, and if you can make a good painting based on a poem, that is a justification as well. (See Appendix B, trans. 8)

Thomas did approve of some of the works in the catalogue, specifically those which departed radically from the poem. He was very aware of the ease with which 'consumer' attitudes towards art are dominating, and his main accusations were, like David Woodford's

condemnation of some of his contemporaries, that modern poets are too often concerned with 'trivialising' poetry.

APPENDIX A

THE EXHIBITION CATALOGUE:

-YSBRYDOLIAETH R.S.THOMAS INSPIRATION-
(CYFEILLION ORIEL PLAS GLYN-Y-WEDDW/
FRIENDS OF PLAS GLYN-Y-WEDDW, 1995)

ISBN: 0-86381-327-5

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEWS WITH CERTAIN ARTISTS -TRANSCRIPTS-

TRANS. 1

IWAN BALA - Rupert Allan.

Tues. July 4th.
Canton, Cardiff.

R: How did you get started?

I: As a Welsh painter, I have a Welsh audience, and I'm lucky because I started at a time when there weren't a lot of Welsh-speaking artists who were tackling these themes which were attractive to the buying public that the media began to bring in. At the same time, this audience outside meant that I wasn't working in isolation. I knew that outside that studio door there was an audience of people that were able to read this work, or were interested in trying. It's really discouraging for an artist to know that nobody's interested in what he's saying. That is a really important thing. I've got this Welsh identity and roots which I can explore, but also have an audience to support this. It's almost like the priest and the flock.

R: Do you think that the visual artist is taking the place traditionally occupied by the priest?

I: Welsh identity means a completely different thing from what it did thirty years ago, when it included a chapel-going non-conformist factor. Where I come from, if you didn't have that then you were lacking in one of the fundamental ingredients of Welsh identity.

R: R.S. Thomas's characters are often of the 'Hill Farmer' variety. In a colonised country, people do tend to define themselves in terms of the outside's view of them. How they are seen formulates who they are.

I: That's true, but it doesn't mean to say that these hill-farmers don't exist either. They have always been there. Perhaps it's more obvious in, for instance, 'archetypal views of the Welsh miner'.

R: Where did your involvement with this particular project start?

I: Edward Thomas's plays had won awards throughout the U.K. So I had worked with him doing paintings for stage, and I was making paintings which interpreted the play, but they were actually visited always separately. I wasn't totally happy with that kind of relation. Then when I got out from showing 'Oriol', and touring, I kind of introduced the idea of getting Ed Thomas to write something which was based on the paintings so reversing this 'evolution'. So he wrote a performance

piece that was done in the gallery, which was his interpretation of my work, so obviously there's a difference because if I'd written a performance to go with the work it might have been more tightly involved in the work. Because he came at it with his interpretation of what I was doing, you've got that gap in between; his understanding of the image from my understanding of making the image: then, going back to him, and him putting that in his actors' performance and writing. So although there are the same beginnings, you've created something which has become separated because of the involvement of the individual artists; you have a different medium of communicating the same ideas.

So he ended up with a play with two people with just their heads sticking up, who were in a kind of limbo land and they were trying to find out where they were. Trying to find out about this place led to finding out, in the meantime, about each other. My paintings, however, were about this experience of being in Africa for a time, coming back, and trying to mesh two cultures together. This is why there are two things: painting on the glass and painting behind - and a gap in the middle. Now he's taken my theme more literally; there are two heads with a gap between them, both of comprehension and of space. So it did work in that way, but it's a difficult thing to do and they might work in one way and not in another, you know. It's something we have to work on over and over, I think. I've always worked with writers and poets, so I think it's an important thing to do.

With Ed, because I knew his work, there was a similarity in thinking, as there was a similarity in our backgrounds except that he comes from the South Wales, I come from North Wales. Our ideas are responsive to things and are similar, so it's easier to work with somebody like that than with somebody with whom you don't share their concerns in the same way.

R: There are a couple of themes in this work in your studio, which are reminiscent of, for instance, Ivor Davies's work, 'The Senior'. He's got that industrial theme, that 'Port-Talbot' look to it. There's a little bit of the 'terraced house' in amongst all this 'mystical' or 'celestial' imagery.

I: Well, I think that we're both working on this theme of Wales where the modern or contemporary is never totally distant from history and with myth, so that, you know, with everything that's happening at the moment, we locate it in a mythic background, or we put it in a context historically.

R: What were the visual influences in this painting? What are your influences? Painterly/Literary traditions - are there any interesting comparisons?

I: As I've moved to live in Grangetown I've applied for various things to do with the Cardiff Bay Development, and these works which I've been doing have been involved with, for instance, a bridge which needed to be done. So my idea was to 'depict' it in this sense of a 'panorama' which linked the modern drowning of an area of land in the Bay to make this big lagoon, with these new buildings going up around

that area, with this folk story about 'Cantre'r Gwaelod' - the Lowland Hundred which is supposedly in Cardigan Bay, but was drowned because the drunken watchman left the sluice gates open and the tide came in and it drowned this whole land. It's a metaphor, I suppose, for a drowned language, because there's a famous poem about it which says: 'Mae gloch o'r cantre'r gwaelod a'r golwg...' - 'The bells of the low one hundred are swallowed by the sea - but you can hear them ringing on a clear night, ringing underwater'. So in a way, it's a metaphor for language, a metaphor for culture. This apathy of the watchman has let the water drown a culture, a people, and a 'voice'.

It's a metaphor which can be used in another situation, and I think in my work and in Ivor's as well, there is this link between modern, mythological, and historical. This also makes it easier to tie in with Welsh poetry and literature - it would be difficult if you were a purely formalist painter, who's only interested in the texture of colours or abstract composition. Then there's only one form of poetry available, which is a poetry that actually does the same with words as the picture does with paint. So you're not interpreting meaning, you're not talking about creating another meaning alongside the narrative of the thing. So because I work in the way I do, it makes it easier to link with the written word.

R: 'What happens when a work of art is created is something which happens simultaneously to all works of art that came before it'. Did this project force you to change styles/depart from your usual themes/subject-matter? Why this particular poem? / Is there any other poetry which, with hindsight, you think might go just as well with this piece?

I: The point I make in the catalogue for *that* show is that I was already working on that series of paintings, so basically I found R.S.Thomas relating my concerns, and found the poetry that went best with my work - rather than to try and illustrate a poem, or changing my current work to fit. The poem was chosen, in a way, so that it actually fitted my work.

R: 'Ideologies' - It could be said that some of R.S.Thomas's poetry is 'didactic'. What were *you* trying to achieve/is there a specific message?

I: The poem fits the work, but I'm also trying to work in an added statement: I chose "Expatriates" to the other painting, where R.S.Thomas is suggesting that the people are leaving the rural areas, and that there is a state of decline, but then I've put in the painting the words: 'i'r pant yr hed y dwr' - to the hollow runs the water. There's not a lot you can do about depopulation in rural areas. In a way I'm an Expatriate because I'm not living in my home, I've moved to the city. It may still be in Wales, but in R.S.Thomas's terms I am an expatriate. I'm saying that's unavoidable, so although he has one argument in his poem, I'm arguing/answering/setting another point. I'm saying 'this is how it's happening now, not just here, but everywhere'. It's happening in Zimbabwe.

R: Can you see any particular strengths or weaknesses in this 'marriage' between poem and painting?

I: Instead of just taking the poem and illustrating it, or, as some have done, chosen a poem "The Landscape" simply because their paintings are of landscapes, I'm at least responding to the poem. But I'm not changing my vision either.

R: How do you think / hope R.S. Thomas might respond to your paintings?

I: Thomas has a poetic vision, but I have a vision too, and I would like to think that he prefers a 'play-off' to happen, rather than for me to just illustrate - you know, a poem mentions a chair and a table, then I just paint the chair and the table in a room - which I think somebody else did!!

R: Do you believe there is a parallel between the 'authentic cultural language', and 'industrial language of Wales? Do you rate one above another? Does there exist a narrative of going in-and-out of the cultural layers like that of your paintings, which goes in-and-out of the 'cultural landscape'? Is the authenticity located within this self-addressing relationship?

I: The levels of what I'm doing now is a different thing. What I was doing then was a physical means of trying to get over this cultural problem of distance. Thus a lot of other things happened: for instance, I started working on glass which I could move around the studio and place against different backgrounds. So the initial idea to do it as a way of expressing myself was helped practically by the fact that my whole method of making a picture changed/was freshened up by that process. There are two things: the expression of an idea, and the method/means by which you do that. Some people/artists, who are only involved in the picture/colour/texture - they've taken one side, and been drawn away from everything else. They're not talking about anything outside of that canvas. So the discourse is limited to the discourse of art, and it doesn't inhabit the cultural 'otherland' of Wales and its people.

R: You have been quoted saying this poetry/painting format 'opens up the arts'.

I: Your audience is enlarged because people come who are into literature and not painting, but come to the gallery all the same. Just like a theatre audience might come to the gallery to listen to a theatre piece, and vice-versa. Therefore, looking at the paintings, the art sinks more into the unconscious of the people, the nation. If you count just one of those interactions, you can see the complexity of artistic/cultural interaction.

Bala goes on to talk about the 'art highway' metaphor, that Wales is a side-road, and that some people have to 'go away' in order to come back and 'see' again. Relates this to his visit to Zimbabwe.

R: As far as 'cultural authenticity' is concerned, that idea of a 'main highway' with tributaries is perhaps better described as a plurality of networks?

I: Yes; and the Welsh culture can't remain static: it is evolving, and we are moving from the rural areas towards the city, but that

doesn't mean that Welsh culture has stopped, or that it isn't authentic now whereas it was at some point in the past. It's a living thing, and the people who want to stop it from changing are just going to kill it. It never has remained the same - there never has been a static period. What post-colonial studies of Africa have taught us is that these cultures can absorb a huge amount of outside and maintain their difference.

R: Is there a specific landscape in your work?

I: My pregnant wife has had a great deal of influence on the symbolism of my recent work. The landscape could be 'pregnant with meaning'. 'Beichiog' (pregnant) has the implication of 'bearing' which is missed in English. I am quite aware of the difference of translation, and the space between inside and outside conceptions of Welsh art. There's a possible theory of indirect prospect with the hills/islands in my current work.

TRANS. 2

IVOR DAVIES - Rupert Allan

Tues. July 4th.
Penarth, Cardiff.

Ivor Davies - 'Senior', its history and development.

R: Briefly, a feminist viewpoint might claim that it is significant that this painting which you are showing me (the original version of 'Senior') involves the classical character of Venus, on top of an industrial landscape. Does the element of 'visual colonisation' enter into the making of picture?

I: I am conscious of feminism, but it is far from deliberate. A woman painting a nude is very different from a man painting a nude - it's almost 'censored' nowadays! In fact, I decided that the original nude looked too 'playboy' - style, which is why I eradicated it in the end. Nevertheless, when you go to the National Gallery and look at the renaissance, you realise that most of those figures are eligible for playboy. Anyway, I changed it to just a 'head'. Then I had the chance to put the necklace in.

R: Why this particular poem? / Is there any other poetry which, with hindsight, you think might go just as well with this piece?

I: This dates back to 1991, when there was an unusual alignment of the stars. Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and the Moon appeared in the formation shown in the painting. this was a particularly powerful image for me, and I painted the initial picture which I have shown you. When I was asked to do the R.S.Thomas painting, the poem I found was 'Senior', because it had a lot of personal significance for me. It seemed to come together in a bizarre way, so I scraped down and repainted the picture in accordance with this new sentiment. In this way,

it is through my personal interpretations that the painting and poem link up. I was going to send a second picture, but due to a misunderstanding, that wasn't sent. It was called 'Abercuawg'. I have a very clear understanding of what this poem signifies. It's to do with a far-off land, an utopia specific to Wales.

R: In terms of 'subject position', can you envisage a viewer within the painting, and does that correspond to a viewer in the poetry?

I: That's an interesting question, particularly in relation to this 'Abercuawg' painting.



Intangible Mona

- It's like the question of who does one paint pictures for. If you write, for instance, are you writing for yourself? Do you have a particular audience in mind? I think, if there is an element of admiration/aspiration in art, then it's the same as writing it for yourself. Unless you wanted to do something on a desert island, which is hardly imaginable, you would be doing it for like-minded people, or people who you would like to be *like* yourself.

R: You can 'inscribe a reader', in the same way as you can 'envisage a viewer'?

I: Exactly; 'Senior' reminds me of myself. Life is chaos; there are no initiation ceremonies at the age of sixteen, twenty-one, etc. You just go on playing it by ear, really, 'no name crossed out in a book' - no monuments. In 'Abercuawg', which I have subtitled 'Intangible Mona', the observer here has an idea which is intangible. Thomas was looking for the Wales of ancient history which he couldn't find in the modern world. I must say, the ideas were often seen after the painting was done, but I don't think that's illegitimate. So there is an interaction between ourselves and the looking figure in the painting.

R: How do you think / hope R.S.Thomas might respond to your paintings?

I: The way in which R.S.Thomas responds to the paintings in Ingrowing Thoughts and Between Here and Now is not the way a painter or art-historian would respond. I'm not saying he got them wrong, but that he has a very eccentric perception of them (in the best way). It was not a 'mainstream' reading of them. He would probably think the same about my painting's interpretation of his poetry. He'd probably think: 'This guy hasn't *quite* got the point of the poem; there's a perspective here which isn't R.S.Thomas'. Everything's like that. you can never 'describe' an event, only 'interpret' it.

R: Alex Campbell is interesting in this respect; he has done a painting of 'The Card Players' by Cezanne, which will create an interesting artistic triangle to discuss. I don't know whether he is aware of the other painting; I'm going to see him in a couple of days.

I: Did it look like the Cezanne, I wonder?

R: I read it before I went to the exhibition and saw it. 'What happens when a work of art is created is something which happens simultaneously to all works of art that came before it'. Did this project force you to change styles/depart from your usual themes/subject-matter?

I: Everything you do *does* make you depart a little bit from what came before. This did - it certainly made me more conscious of the relationship between poetry and painting. I've always been interested in this anyway. These two particular paintings were certainly changed by the poetry, and in that sense, everything previously was changed in its direction.

R: What were the visual influences in this painting? What are your influences? Painterly/Literary traditions - are there any interesting comparisons?

I: The metaphysical element is important, which then led to surrealism, too. The people that really inspire me are artists like Giorgio de Chirico. The metaphysicals preceded the surrealists. They painted ordinary objects, but often in strange juxtaposition with others - as if they had some bizarre presence in themselves. I've also done other pictures which use letters in them. I like the use of 'lettering', and 'exploding' artistic genres.

R: So you don't see Thomas as a 'modernist' poet, but more along the lines of the 'Pastoral', or 'Romantic'?

I: I don't say I don't see him as a modern poet, what I mean to say is that some of his ideas are dated. I don't think he'd write some of this poetry now like that.

R: Were you aware/Are you aware of critical issues in the work? Do you see him as 'abstract', 'representative', 'impressionist', 'realist'?

I: 'Realist', I would think, if I had to chose one, but it is a realism which he associates more with an expressionistic realism.

R: 'Ideologies' - It could be said that some of R.S.Thomas's poetry is 'didactic'. What were *you* trying to achieve/is there a specific message?

I: Already in the 1970s, people were talking about the 'crisis in art'. There was no longer a subject in art. It was in a kind of 'post-abstract limbo'. So I would in fact like there to be a message, and this comes through in my choice of 'Abercuawg'. The destruction of communities, the destruction of Wales linguistically, culturally. The Wales ancient and modern is both specific *and* universal. Therefore, it raises oneself to that level of all other people in the world.

R: In "Welsh History", R.S.Thomas refers to the Welsh nation fighting 'in lands to which we had no claim', 'gnawing the bones of a dead culture'. Given that R.S.Thomas has been described, in conversation, and in his writing, as 'self-ironic', do you really believe that he sees the nation as having an 'ineptitude', or do you believe in the 'new dawn' to which he refers.

I: It is pessimistic, and, it seems to me, dated. I don't really agree with this constant self-flagellation at not being able to express himself poetically through the medium of Welsh. I went to China a while ago. It's uncomfortable to travel, so I went to a travel agent *in order to make sure of going with a group of whom none spoke English*. I didn't have to speak to any of them, and it was an extremely interesting visit. I don't really think the same as R.S.Thomas on this subject. William Morris translated Icelandic sagas without knowing the language - as did Ezra Pound with his Chinese. Children can pick up a foreign language without really knowing it. So I don't really believe in this rather serious attitude towards language. I myself am far more flippant. I'm deeply interested in language, of course, and I should say that to write poetry in Welsh is more difficult than English. Italian, too. But then, we don't know English that well. Many people can't write in English. I think that too much of Thomas's poetry is dated, that he's 'flogging a dead horse', that he has a pessimistic attitude towards the past. Also, what annoys me is that the poems in the anthologies are never dated. We don't know when he wrote them, and it's very important, I think, to know when these things happen.

'Whilst fighting in lands to which we had no claim' is reminiscent of the idea of the Welsh Fusiliers being sent to the Falklands, or Bosnia, perhaps. The pessimism is turned in on Thomas himself as you say. Perhaps he was writing at a time when people were more pessimistic. There's not so much pessimism now - people tend to 'get on with it'. I think he's sad that, for instance, hill farmers do not produce children to carry on the farm; people are constantly looking back to a past which never existed. He's sad about the way things are. Even I can recognise which houses have been bought by English 'settlers', because they've been 'tidied up'. Perhaps the Welsh are 'growing back to nature'. Re Gwyneth Tomos's 'The Small Window'. It's funny that some of the most ardent supporters of the Welsh language are English, some Welsh people are almost 'ashamed' of their nationality. It's a lot more complex than meets the eye.

R: What is your attitude towards Peter Lord?

I: I've reviewed The Aesthetics of Relevance, and I think Peter Lord is one of the most original art historians in Wales, maybe in Britain. He has all but created a revolution; his research and attitude are the most original I've read.

Possible contact point: A talk by Shiela Hurahan, in September, 1995, on the subject of painting and poetry in the Welsh Arts. To be given at Conwy, N.Wales.

TRANS. 3

ALEX CAMPBELL - Rupert Allan

Wed. July 5th,
Nannerch, Mold.

R: What did you think of the exhibition?

A: I thought it was superb, very good. The painting which struck me was 'Arrival', by Maredudd ap Iestyn. I found it quite disturbing, because of the colours and everything. I think there were a few mistakes; I think they should have got all the artists to sign one of the catalogues, and R.S.Thomas too; they should have had it bound with leather, and had a raffle to raise money for the gallery. I also think they should have gathered all the artists together at the opening and photographed them together. When you look through old catalogues, it is interesting to see who responded to who in what way. Glyn-y-Weddw is a superb venue, and Dafydd ap Tomos is a 'natural'. He hangs pictures instinctively well. It's a money-making gallery because it promotes Welsh art. Also, a lot of the expatriate Welsh, who are the 'friends' want to see it kept going. They are willing to pledge money, because of its exclusive independence. It's been made into an 'A' category gallery by Dafydd ap Tomos.

R: Why this particular poem? / Is there any other poetry which, with hindsight, you think might go just as well with this piece?

A: When I read the poem about Cezanne's 'The Card Players', I covered the painting up, read the poem, and thought 'that's the one!' I based it on a very old painting from the 1890s. He talks about the pipe with no smoke, and also about there being no clock and yet the men know what time it is. I put the timetable on the wall to give it this sense of structure. I also responded to the 'boredom'. He also says 'nobody calls trumps'. This is quite a good painting, but I don't think it's one of his best! Perhaps it's not fair to compete with Cezanne! I notice that some of the artists have chosen, in some cases, the same poem, which shows how many different readings there are of the same poem.

I had a plan to paint a group of hikers, because of the ordinance survey grid references in 'Sonata in X'. It's that mathematical element of topography which I could identify with. It's a shame nobody has painted portraits of R.S.Thomas.

R: So you could say that your style ties in with the idea of a 'mechanised landscape' or 'vision'?

A: I thought in a way he had just discovered mathematical symbols and language. I liked 'meet me tonight at SH 126 243'. My painting hints at evening time because of its black-and-white composition.

R: 'Ideologies' - It could be said that some of R.S.Thomas's poetry is 'didactic'. What were *you* trying to achieve/is there a specific message?

A: My idea was simply to bring the poem and painting together as closely as possible. In fact, a great deal of the 'Vorticists' went on to draw machines. If you take another branch of Cubism, the Italian branch of Cubism: Futurism, that eventually went on to become Fascism, which was a complete machine. The perfection of the machine is not something I would 'aspire to', but something from which I gain inspiration. I get a lot of my material from old pictures/photographs. We are tempted to look back on it as a 'Golden Age'. It was not a 'Golden Age', but maybe it was an easier age to live in. Somebody said that a hundred years ago, a man could teach his son everything he needed to know. There were less choices a hundred years ago.

R: 'What happens when a work of art is created is something which happens simultaneously to all works of art that came before it'. Did this project force you to change styles/depart from your usual themes/subject-matter?

A: I listen to a lot of Jazz, and I get quite a few of my titles from Jazz. Paul Klee talked about an artist needing a trigger. However, this project didn't change the style in which I was painting. The two met up quite happily when brought together.

R: Were you aware/Are you aware of critical issues in the work?

A: Not really, but I do respond to the 'Romantic'/'Mysticism' element in the poem. I'm quite interested in the atmospheres at religious sites - the atmosphere at a catholic cathedral, with the coloured light etc., is very different from, for instance, the atmosphere at St. Gybi's Well on Pen Llyn.

R: How do you think / hope R.S.Thomas might respond to your paintings?

A: I hope he would respond to the style, and have an affinity with it, as he should remember the thirties, during which time many of the 'Vorticist' painters were working.

R: Can you see any particular strengths or weaknesses in this 'marriage' between poem and painting?

A: The only problem I had was the line about 'the empty bottle', which didn't fit in. The 'light they go by' line, though, worked well, because the light lights up the timetable on the wall. I loved the line about their 'inane boredom'.

R: What were the visual influences in this painting? What are your influences? Painterly/Literary traditions - are there any interesting comparisons?

A: Wyndham Lewis was of course the most famous 'Vorticist', but also Bomberg went through a period, early Stanley Spenser, early Henry Moore, John and Paul Nash, Wadsworth, William Roberts. When you read Blast, for instance, it describes itself as 'anti-cubist, but it's cubist. [R: Perhaps the fact that it defines itself against 'Cubism' is a give-away?]. Yes. Lewis talks about a 'spaghetti' of ideas up above, and says we can reach up and pull down an idea, and that's where ideas come from. But because it's 'spaghetti', there's another end, and someone else can reach up and grasp the other end of that idea simultaneously. It's an interesting notion. I read through six books on R.S.Thomas when I was invited. I wasn't keen on the 'religious' stuff but really enjoyed the other stuff. I always find that he seems to miss out the final line. The poem which I nearly did was a verse from the one about Owain Glyndwr. It goes: 'Look at the small Welsh sheep; such sweet meat, from such little bones, but not for the taste of the hireling shepherd'. The line to add, of course, is the one which tells you who will eat - the English, of course.

I studied on a 'Design for Reproduction', and involved designing graphic materials and articles. I specialised in lithography and silk screen as it was coming out. However, I've always wanted to get further than a simple reproduction.

R: In terms of 'subject position', can you envisage a viewer within the painting, and does that correspond to a viewer in the poetry?

A: The board outside my local pub was painted by Richard Wilson, and is of two men's heads back-to-back, looking in opposite directions. The pub is called the 'Loggerheads', but he has called his picture 'We Three Blockheads'. So who is the third? It has to be the viewer. I don't know how this works in my work. I think the picture is laid down by the artist, and it is up to the viewer how s/he picks it up. Then they can pick things out which the artist isn't aware of.

R: Were you aware/Are you aware of critical issues in the work?

A: Not really, except that Allen Ginsberg is my favourite poet.

R: In "Welsh History", R.S.Thomas refers to the Welsh nation fighting 'in lands to which we had no claim', 'gnawing the bones of a dead culture'. Given that R.S.Thomas has been described, in conversation, and in his writing, as 'self-ironic', do you really believe that he sees the nation as having an 'ineptitude', or believe in the 'new dawn' to which he refers?

A: I'm English, so I have to view all this from outside. I think some parts of Wales have got a problem. For instance, this is signified by Oriel Mon's arguments over where the gallery should be positioned. They had got a grant, and six million pounds from Shell as sponsorship, but it took them ten years to decide. It was Kyffin Williams who finally stopped it by donating a load of paintings. In Welsh politics there's still too much in-fighting, which isn't necessary. They should be looking for the positive aspects. I think Welsh art is well-developed, and also well-funded. Art has to be concerned with 'the best'. I sneakingly accept

Graham Sutherland as a Welsh painter, and also Piper. I will read some more of R.S.Thomas. I enjoyed the project.

TRANS. 4

LESLIE JONES - Rupert Allan

Thurs. July 6th. Colwyn
Bay, N. Wales.

R: Did you go to the exhibition?

L: Yes.

R: What did you think?

L: I liked the way it was hung, if that's what you mean. It seems to 'hang together', and it was a difficult one, because of the diversity of sizes of the paintings, and also of different approaches. Dafydd has even managed to hang each artist side by side. I thanked him, in fact, for doing that, because it was a difficult job.

R: Why this particular poem? / Is there any other poetry which, with hindsight, you think might go just as well with this piece?

L: These poems were chosen specifically; there are no other poems that could fit. I haven't been quite honest in this work, as you may gather; it is two paintings by Ben Shahn, who was an American, a Latvian Jew, very much influenced by Diego Guiverra, and the left-wing movement of the nineteen- twenties and thirties - and mural painting. He was also very much concerned with the Sacho Vanchez issue in America and was 'politically minded'. I wrote my thesis on Shahn, linking up his politics with his art (and his Jewishness), and using Tolstoy as my stepping stone. So I've always been intrigued by Ben Shahn as a man - I've seen some of his work, and I've read most of what he's written or what has been written about him. When I read R.S.Thomas's poetry, I found it very depressing, very black. His poems don't appeal to me very much, because it's a side of human nature that I'm interested in, but not from his point of view. Then I suddenly came across a poem called 'Nocturne', and it was a straightforward description of this painting - of one man playing the guitar, and the other asking him questions. So that poem is *that* (the top half). What I did was make a copy of that painting, a rendering. The painting is, in fact, a mural at Colombia University. The painting at the bottom is a portrait of Doug Hammershot, one of the first secretaries of the United Nations. He was involved in the Congo wars. He committed suicide eventually. He was a tragic figure; politically a 'good' man, but branded because of his sexual 'peccadilloes' - he was homosexual - and he suffered quite a lot. He also tried to control the use and misuse, and the spreading of, the atomic bomb. Ben Shahn had been commissioned to paint his portrait, but they never met for the sitting. So Shahn produced a painting based on photographs and their one meeting.

Shahn wrote one of Hammershot's political statements in the painting - I wrote 'Ah!' Also, that one there is 'Nocturne'. So, in Shahn's

view, this picture depicts the threat of the atomic bomb, and the demon (pattern of demon on the sitter's shoulder). I've changed that to the demon 'always on R.S.Thomas's shoulder'. I think that R.S.Thomas does have a demon on his shoulder. He also writes poems which are precise descriptions of paintings. He doesn't take it beyond its picture frame, only his response to the painting. The demon ties in with Thomas's attitude towards industry, and urban society (something which I try to represent with the area of red on the right). So, going within the painting, you have Ben Shahn's painting, then a large canvas where Thomas the author is coming out to write the poem, and in the background is a statement of urban society. So it's playing about with two men's ideas, two men's writing.

R: - or maybe three - your own?

L: But I'm only a spectator.

R: That's very useful. What were the visual influences in this painting? What are your influences? Painterly/Literary traditions - are there any interesting comparisons?

L: The other painting I did of 'Girl' was a direct illustration. But I have also been trained, as an illustrator, to be able to paint a 'metaphysical dream', for instance. My postgraduate work was as a printmaker, so as well as the fine art bias, there is also a strong literary bias. I've even got a printing press. 'Girl' is a nasty poem, which signifies rape etc., and I wanted to present it as a human, but in the form of a doll. It is a Welsh landscape behind, and the wolf/fox figure lurking there is my own interpretation of Welsh landscape, even Welsh society. That's my own personal play on what's there.

R: In terms of 'subject position', can you envisage a viewer within the painting, and does that correspond to a viewer in the poetry? Do you think that they are different? You called yourself the 'spectator' in the 'Ah!' piece.

L: Entirely different, because in 'Girl', I am participant, whereas in the other one I'm not. Neither of them are my ideas - they are out of my control. All I've done is to assemble them, to 'cheat' in fact, and to 'take the mickey'. I would have liked, incidentally, for them to have printed 'Nocturne' on the same page, but they didn't. I think that the poem ties in with the blood in the bottom part of the piece, but I've changed his 'ecclesiastical' concept of blood into a political one.

R: How do you think / hope R.S.Thomas might respond to your paintings?

L: I don't know Thomas, I've only met him briefly. I've never discussed his poetry, *neither have I ever heard his poetry discussed by anyone*. I've only read his stuff, and that's it. So my knowledge of what he really is about is very limited. I've read most of the critical books, but I'm still non-the-wiser.

R: 'Ideologies' - It could be said that some of R.S.Thomas's poetry is 'didactic'. What were *you* trying to achieve/is there a specific message?

L: I have an academic background. So my existence is often as a critical agent. I would perhaps use the word 'safe' to describe my

point of view. When I realised the difference between myself now and as it was when I studied Ben Shahn, I decided that the word and the image would become far more interactive from now on.

R: What happens when a work of art is created is something which happens simultaneously to all works of art that came before it. Did this project force you to change styles/depart from your usual themes/subject-matter?

L: It made me look back, because I don't work like that any more. The last time I looked at a Ben Shahn painting was over thirty years ago. My wife commented that it's interesting to see how Shahn's style, his way of arrangement, has influenced me as an artist, which is something I hadn't been aware of. So, in doing this piece, I was resurrecting my own past as a result of R.S.Thomas's contact with Shahn. As soon as I saw the poem, it brought the painting to mind. So there was a personal homage.

R: How do you think / hope R.S.Thomas might respond to your paintings?

L: If he knew his paintings, he would recognise where I got the material from, and consequently what I have done. He'd either be amused or cross. It would be interesting to find out, because it takes the mickey out of the poetry. 'Girl', I should imagine, is an anathema to him, because it is a visualisation. So I have drawn my interpretation of what he has written - he wouldn't like that, I don't suppose. When you illustrate books, you either draw what you're told to draw, or you comment about what you read. No artist, as an illustrator, may depart from the fact that they are the 'poet's illustrator'. I liked Iwan Bala's work, and I told him I was glad *one* of us had been "the poet".

R: Can you see any particular strengths or weaknesses in this 'marriage' between poem and painting?

L: I will destroy them if and when they come back.

R: Is that out of habit? Do you wish to comment further?

L: I'm just not happy with them, and I don't want them to exist as originals. They'll exist in this catalogue, which is enough of an angst! If they're sold, I shall smile.

R: What were the visual influences in this painting? What are your influences? Painterly/Literary traditions - are there any interesting comparisons? Were you aware/Are you aware of critical issues in the work?

L: Yes. I've read most of the monographs on R.S.Thomas, and of course I read a lot anyway - that's my background. I found some of the critics treating the poetry simply from the point of view of the use of words. I wanted a poet to write about him, not somebody who had been commissioned by the Welsh Arts Council. Euros Bowen, for instance is far more fun, and European. R.S.Thomas is the abyss of the Celtic mind. Euros isn't; he is looking somewhere beyond this. Thomas is aside from modernism

R: In "Welsh History", R.S.Thomas refers to the Welsh nation fighting 'in lands to which we had no claim', 'gnawing the bones of a dead culture'. Given that R.S.Thomas has been described, in

conversation and in his writing, as 'self-ironic', do you really believe that he sees the nation as having an 'ineptitude for life'? Do you believe in the 'new dawn' to which he refers?

L: He does think that. I believe in his philosophy, and understand his cynicism, but from what I have seen and read of him, his method is probably revolutionary - as long as he can stand back and not get involved. I feel that he is being manipulative, in pushing other people to do things that he talks about. This comes out in his anti-English tendencies. I don't like the idea of young people being manipulated by an older generation.

R: What do you think of his self-flagellation at not being able to write in Welsh?

L: He's left it a bit late. I'm sceptical of the adulation given to him, because he decries his own roots, he decries his own people, and he can do all this from the secure position which he now occupies. He's invulnerable: his position was given to him by the establishment and the intelligentsia.

R: So you believe that any 'radicalism' to be got out of his poetry is ultimately contained, thus 'non-active'?

L: Yes. Thank God, in some ways. Parish priests in Wales are lonely men, in the Church in Wales. There is always this question of which religion had the potential to let us thrive culturally - Catholicism, Non-Conformism, or the Church in Wales (which is a compromise). R.S.Thomas is a man that's been left alone, so I wonder what his priesthood was for? Much more is expected of a non-conformist priest. He has to be an actor, and in that hour/hour and a half, he has much more control over, and interaction with, his congregation. So he can 'manipulate'.

R: What do you think of Peter Lord?

L: I enjoy his books. He expresses himself very well. Perhaps we feel that he shouldn't, and there's no need for it. But we resent the fact that he is / has become our conscience, that he is telling us what we should be aware of etc. Many of us are 'anglified', which has in some ways moderated our point of view. Thus, he appears as too deliberate, too self-conscious. He has become a convert, but then again, his attitude would be that 'if you don't do it, I will'. This is, of course, justified. Perhaps he is showing us a way that should make us feel guilty. But we don't, and we haven't. We have become part of the 'complacent establishment'. I have, and I feel guilty about it.

He has now put forward the idea that Wales had an artistic tradition of naive folk-art. Most people like me have been blocked from Europe by England. Scotland and Ireland have never had to deal with the geographical problem. It is a fact of history. So we must feel forgiven not guilty. I wish Lord would realise that we aren't all tainted by the brush. There is something in us essentially Welsh, which may have been encouraged by England but originates in Wales. Ivor Davies feels strongly about this, but doesn't show it on canvas. Many of us weren't comfortable with what we were asked to do.

TRANS. 5

DAVID WOODFORD - Rupert Allan

Fri. July 7th, Nant
Efrancon, N. Wales

R: What did you think about the way the exhibition was laid out?

D: I don't think there is a narrative in the exhibition. I think it's been - to put it tactlessly - slung together. The mistake was to leave it up to the artists. That divided the issue up between that number of artists. In the introduction to the catalogue, Wyn Thomas points out that 'it involves translating one response from one medium into another which is profoundly different'. This rather deflates the whole idea. The thing about language is that it is the language of everything. The written word is the language into which everything can be converted. The variant perhaps lies in a danger of thinking that if this is so, then it is presumed that, if anyone can deal with words, then words can thus deal with anything. But it is not true to say that if all monkeys are animals, then all monkeys are animals. That is a dangerous position for language to be in. The twentieth century in art is to do with the painting of ideas.

R: Why this particular poem? / Is there any other poetry which, with hindsight, you think might go just as well with this piece?

D: These were paintings which I already had, and were left over from another exhibition! It is wrong, however, to suppose that art is art because an individual calls it this. A painting is something very specific, and is quite separate from an illustration, for instance. Left to our own devices, it was debatable whether some of us were illustrating R.S.Thomas, or whether, in fact, he was illustrating us! We were given no indication as to what to do.

What I was looking for were words which didn't relate to people. In fact, they do (!), but they relate not to culture, but to humanity. I probably overstep the mark, but I find R.S.Thomas very dated; I find his notion of people totally political, not real at all. I know nothing about humanity except that we're a complete mystery. Thomas often talks about this mystery in a cultural context - to which I respond very positively. However, as soon as he starts redefining some of these things about 'Welsh Hill Farmers' and suffering etc., I have my doubts. I looked for a text about landscape not in terms of people - perhaps humanity, but not people - and therefore, I had to go to 'The Mountains' for 'the bright hem of God' extract. Thomas here sounds almost as if he's saying something on behalf of the Green Party, or someone: 'life, with its money and its honours, its pride and its past, be of little worth if

we are to lose these'. I didn't pick it for that reason - in fact, it came across as rather too sloganistic, but nevertheless, it's what I believe. What he says in this proves he has finally caught up with the twentieth century!

R: 'Ideologies' - It could be said that some of R.S.Thomas's poetry is 'didactic'. What were *you* trying to achieve/is there a specific message?

D: I think that the extracts are making queries about human nature, rather than stating anecdotal cultural comments, as most of his poetry is. These extracts are good because they are 'open'. If you are an intelligent painter, you are not trying to make a statement, you're trying to discover something. Because tomorrow I shall believe in something different - if ever so slightly so - from what I believe today. I think the young generation must wonder what all this sad tone about Wales is about.

R: 'What happens when a work of art is created is something which happens simultaneously to all works of art that came before it'. Did this project force you to change styles/depart from your usual themes/subject-matter?

D: This won't affect anything that I do in the future. All art is concurrent with what is going on *as long as you know about it*. The great revolutions of the beginning of this century almost unanimously decided that tradition was a malforming influence. therefore, modern art is not the continuing of tradition; it is the rejection of it. But tradition is too strong to reject. In some inverted way one always takes it onboard, but even so, there is also a taking onboard of certain anti-traditional, destructive factors. So we have an art form which is alternative. Twentieth-century art is an alternative to what would have happened if there had not been this rejection of tradition. We live in an age which can record the moving image in real time, and if you can do this, it makes the static image something different. The static image is *changed* by the emergence of the moving image, and this is something which the modern painter does not seem to acknowledge. The modern painter is not modern. The modern painter is, in fact, totally archaic. He is still trying to give rebirth to the importance of painting. I'm not trying to give it that false identity. I say that painting is what it always was. It may be a minor art-form. The individual passion is so minute in the general scope of things. However that passion is enough. It justifies anything. We must put our foot down now, while it's still possible to recognise that definition of 'still art' *in its own right*. It should not be compared with the moving image.

R: Were you aware/Are you aware of critical issues in the work?

D: As above, really, but I don't really think in those terms. Maybe if you are seeing it from the literary side, then idea is very much your currency. I am poetry-blind, but sometimes I feel he is really using words properly and my criticism ceases. He's dated in the way that he perceives his own nation. I can't comment on the actual literary style. If you live beyond tradition, however you paint, if you are not part of a

communal belief, then you are only part of your own belief. This is something specific to this century. Its consequence is that every single painter is trying to 'rediscover' art. This is ridiculous. It's like asking a child to rediscover education - it doesn't mean anything; it's a non-thing. The whole point of education, just as with art, is that you *don't* expect people to use their own experience, but you provide them with a shortcut to a new experience by providing them with the following information. So people try to become wise by reading the first page of every book. Hypothesis is useless unless it's in a set context. You can't fly a kite without holding the strings. Reynolds said in his discourses that every student, landing on a new found shore, presumes to have discovered a new continent. The discovery is not the point.

R: What were the visual influences in this painting? What are your influences? Painterly/Literary traditions - are there any interesting comparisons?

D: My paintings are of objects, but they are also totally abstract. My form of painting is what exists beyond reason. Once something is imbued with human sentiment, it takes on a life of its own. I thought Iwan Bala's image was the most successful in the exhibition, however, in that it was an obvious product of an imagination, an imagination which has become visual. It's the image that isn't in the catalogue which I like. He's a socio-political painter, so he's the man for this kind of job.

But for certain qualms, I could quite possibly be an abstract painter. In other words, I could easily be looking for the pure visual language, on a par with music, but on painting terms. This would mean that there could never be any contact with the literary medium at all, because of the belief that the dynamic of the visual world is totally separate from the dynamic of the literary, or any other art-form. My qualms are the definition of the term 'abstract'. Firstly, there is only one real form of the word abstract - that is in music. This is so because it is the only art-form which is completely non-referential. Because music refers to nothing, there is no such thing as a mental process when listening to music. It is purely emotion, going straight from what you hear to what you feel. So this is the ultimate 'desirable' content of any art experience. The more it can leave out the referential bridge, the better. All arts aspire to the condition of music.

R: What about canons in music, and established crescendo devices.

D: There are *structures* in music, but they're always purely *abstract*. They only refer to themselves, not anything outside of that.

R: So within itself, music is 'intertextual'?

D: Yes. It is all a case of association. 'Descriptive music' is repulsive. The more it tries to be referential, the more it ceases to be its own true form. Other art-forms have 'true' natures, but they're not 'pure' natures. They're true to themselves, so the nature of painting is referential. The primary function of vision lies outside art, and art can't actually ignore this. So the 'true' or 'natural' nature of vision is not abstraction. The word 'abstract' must always refer to a certain potency, not a mere construction. So this word is very complex.

On the subject of literary traditions / theory, no doubt you could put an interpretation onto my work. You could say it's romantic, but it's not 'Wordsworthian', or 'picturesque' - it's lost all its literary ties. A chap sits out there; he gets frostbite in his ankles, thirty-mile-an-hour wind, painting this damned scene. This is very different indeed. My process is one of discovery, it's one of being absolutely in a position of not knowing anything. Of taking landscape on, and rediscovering it on its own terms, not in literary terms. (BUT HE HAS JUST SAID THAT YOU NEED TO HOLD THE STRINGS TO FLY THE KITE!)

R: How do you think / hope R.S. Thomas might respond to your paintings?

D: I wondered that. I would hope that he would share my sentiment that we had gone from one language to another. He would have to allow us complete licence. He would also, presumably, be pleased to have had his work re-endorsed. If it was done the other way around, there is a certain amount of hurt that could be achieved through turning one art-form into another. In my essay, if I may quote it, I talk about what a painting is: 'The deception, on the flat surface is no lie, but a translation into a poetic reality that distils fact into a feeling, and steals an eternity from time. Paintings are born in a slow mode, from a stillness of mind, and to be accessed in this manner. They have been aptly described as productively ineloquent, demanding not reaction, but an absorbed suspension of will.' I can't condone/admire topography and illustration.

R: Why weren't your poems for sale?

D: Only because I wanted to hold onto it, because I have just sold a lot of paintings. I don't sell work until I've kept it for some time, because however bad/good/indifferent it is, it's something which I'm trying to work out now. You have to hold onto things to know what to do next. In trying to produce a 'pure' language, it must exist in abstraction. Therefore, I wouldn't want even to try and find associations. It's not my business. I just want to look at the world as someone standing in awe of it. Look at Tom Wolfe; The Painted Word. I justify my style with the sheer weight of work which I have produced over the years.

R: In terms of 'subject position', can you envisage a viewer within the painting, and does that correspond to a viewer in the poetry?

D: Wyn Thomas again points out that landscape has no sentiment; we merely bring our sentiment to it.

R: In "Welsh History", R.S. Thomas refers to the Welsh nation fighting 'in lands to which we had no claim', 'gnawing the bones of a dead culture'. Given that R.S. Thomas has been described, in conversation, and in his writing, as 'self-ironic', do you really believe that he sees the nation as having an 'ineptitude for life'? Do you believe in the 'new dawn' to which he refers?

D: I find the whole political Welsh issue utterly absurd. It starts from so many premises that it doesn't hold water. R.S. Thomas is a bit morbid, and what is moribund in life is good food for the poet. I think Thomas is quite pleased to have something to be melancholic about.

Compared with technology, painting has become a nuance; the belief in its artifice undermined. Now everything appears to be an artifice once it's seen in retrospect. This historical artifice is really born out of conceptual limitations. What Thomas seems to forget is that the new Wales will be born out of electronics and technology like everything else. Marshall McLuhan drew attention to the fact that any means of communication refashions the nature of what is communicated. This is the age we live in. Boundaries are created solely by what people chose to put out over this system. Old boundaries will be seen to be false in the context of the new language/perception which is forming.

I don't see language as where culture is located, at least not explicitly. In the new Wales which is growing up, the next generation will produce half a million *English* people who will speak Welsh, so the Welsh language is no more synonymous of the Welsh culture than 'all animals are monkeys', to use that expression again. My objection to R.S. Thomas is that 'this language' is not 'one' language. In the light of the above, what 'language' are we talking about? There are at least two versions of it.

R: How do you see yourself as an artist?

D: Any answer I give will have to be totally suspect. Each of us is an island when it comes to being operative. We can only put together certain emotional forces within ourselves which we see as permanent, and we utilise them. *We merely respond. Goes on to describe his first 'aesthetic experience'*. Now the 'aesthetic' has become so isolated - like taking flight away from the bird - that I don't believe this situation can exist. Life is an act of faith. What you cannot do, is delve into the coordinates of the past and predict the future. All any of us have is our own integrity. I'm quite prepared to go back to nature and say 'you have got more to teach us'. It's the experience that matters. 'Romantic', 'Picturesque' etc., are historical chapter-headings.

TRANS. 6

MAREDUDD AP IESTYN - Rupert Allan

**Fri. July
7th. Caernarfon.**

R: Why this particular poem? / Is there any other poetry which, with hindsight, you think might go just as well with this piece?

M: Well, what I did when I got the commission was to go through R.S. Thomas's *Collected Works*, but I'd also been to see him at a reading of his poetry, and in that, he said that he hated all the early stuff. I tried to see why. The early stuff is very visual, and can be drawn easily. 'Cynddylan on a Tractor', etc. have been overdone. I was reading through the *Works*, and I kept coming back to a group which he had written in the late seventies/early eighties. So these poems are together in the book. I quite liked 'The Arrival'. I like the idea of a sure place to stay. The 'darkness' does not signify pessimism, but rather security.

R: Do you have any definition of 'Ysbrydoliaeth'?

M: In that sense, yes. 'The Arrival' was a bit of a rush to get to the printers, so it was much more an 'illustration' as such. The second one I had more time for. This one has more feel for the poem itself. It had to do with a 'response'. I had an idea to do a similar thing to David Jones, so there is the theme of the trenches, and also the second world war. I chose the poems specifically. There was a lot of 'Welsh landscapes', but I wanted to find particular poems, rather than just take a painting out of the draw and say 'this is a Welsh landscape'. I wanted to try to do something unique. Then again, there were some poems which I would never dream of illustrating - things like the death of his wife are so personal, and the poem says everything anyway. It would demean the poem to do a drawing of it. It could 'bend', or distort it, too.

R: What did you think of the way the exhibition was set out?

M: It was quite nicely spaced out, but there wasn't enough room. They could have done with another room. It was a pity that some of the paintings had to be out in the entrance hall. But then, some of them were big paintings! It was a very good exhibition as far as the standard of work was concerned. I am a minimalist, so as such would prefer to hang my paintings without a complex background. Then again, part of the charm of Glyn-y-Weddw is that it is a period building. It would be silly to block off the windows or alcoves.

R: How do you see yourself? What were the visual influences in this painting? What are your influences? Painterly/Literary traditions - are there any interesting comparisons?

M: David Jones is *the* artist, of course, but I'm an architect by profession. My art isn't really illustration. I'm quite interested in the way that humankind can change his environment, can 'scar' landscapes. Also 'vernacular building', sheds, ancient architecture. I do it as a record as much as anything else. I respond to how humankind places itself within an environment in this sense.

R: How do you think / hope R.S. Thomas might respond to your paintings?

M: I hope he wouldn't simply say 'Oh, that's a nice painting' - that would be like me saying 'Oh, that's a nice poem!' I like to think that he would be able to see the paintings in their own right, not simply an illustration. Like Iwan Bala, I have worked in the poetry-painting interaction with another artist, but in that case, I gave him paintings to write about.

R: How did you feel about what he had written? Also, 'Ideologies' - It could be said that some of R.S. Thomas's poetry is 'didactic'. What were *you* trying to achieve / is there a specific message?

M: In the poem which is not in the catalogue, there is a lot of reference to David Jones - there are things in it which I personally know about David Jones. I suppose that, in bringing more than one artist together, the art grows bigger than its component parts.

R: Can you see any particular strengths or weaknesses in this 'marriage' between poem and painting?

M: With the second painting, there was a different creative process at play. I didn't agree with the fact that some people had taken ready-painted pictures.

R: In terms of 'subject position', can you envisage a viewer within the painting, and does that correspond to a viewer in the poetry?

M: I consider myself as the same person as the one in the poem. It's the same viewer in the painting, and the fact that the poet is addressing itself to someone creates an interesting idea of who the viewer thinks s/he is.

R: What happens when a work of art is created is something which happens simultaneously to all works of art that came before it. Did this project force you to change styles/depart from your usual themes/subject-matter?

M: My 'style' has been changing slowly for some time, now. I try and avoid using brushes as much as I can. I like mixing: I always use different media, and that was brought out in this project. What I have been known to do is to paint, then fold the paper up while it's wet, and see what the effect is. So there are a lot of bits of paper in the bin! I also like to run paint/ink into the wet paint. I like the texture, and also the process of the painting itself. I used to do a lot of pen-and-ink, and washes, but I don't seem to be doing that any more. This project has shown a way to newer work, there is certainly a development going on, but also I don't know if it is exclusively down to this work itself.

R: Were you aware/Are you aware of critical issues in the work?

M: I don't read much poetry, but am quite aware, for instance, of Peter Lord. I agree with his idea that there is an 'over importance' given to literature in Wales.

R: In "Welsh History", R.S.Thomas refers to the Welsh nation fighting 'in lands to which we had no claim', 'gnawing the bones of a dead culture'. Given that R.S.Thomas has been described, in conversation, and in his writing, as 'self-ironic', do you really believe that he sees the nation as having an 'ineptitude for life'? Do you believe in the 'new dawn' to which he refers?

M: His work is very important, and more important, perhaps, to the Welsh. His poetry represents a different viewpoint, and this is good because Welsh poetry tends to be a bit self-reflexive, or self-referential. R.S.Thomas plays the role of a balance between those elements of pessimism and strange optimism in Welsh literature. He incorporates the both, drawing from himself in a very personal way. He doesn't have a problem exposing himself. The earlier poems, which refer to 'inbred' descriptions of Wales, established his English reputation. This is 'anglo-centric', but if he hadn't been accepted in England in the 'fifties, he wouldn't be well-known anyway.

R: "Many of us weren't comfortable with what we were asked to do"(Leslie Jones). Were you?

M: Well, I wasn't sure what they wanted, or what they were trying to do. I also wasn't sure how the other artists were going to

respond. I wasn't in close contact with any of the other artists - I know Iwan, that's all. So I knew that this kind of response would do.

R: What do you see as being this 'new dawn'?

M: You have to be positive. The church has served as a frame for society, but that Methodist revival knocked it out of the Welsh nation anyway. So, in that sense, the culture is not 'authentically located' in that framework. I think that, with the television and media generally, people are beginning to be more visual. There's also another group of people - people who are Welsh, but don't speak Welsh. They are quite a majority really, and seem to be ignored on both sides. There are very few broadcasts done for the benefit of those people.

R: How do you see Thomas's attitude towards class through his descriptions of 'priest and peasant', for instance.

M: He's quite honest in a way, and talks about his crises of faith openly. I used to attend the Church in Wales, rather than the chapel, and perhaps that makes me read it differently from some people.

R: What kind of style do you see your own work as?

M: The new Romantics of the late 'fifties - Graham Sutherland, John Piper. A lot of the early poetry is nearer to that style, too. I don't know where I'm going now! The best thing about the whole exercise was re-reading Thomas's poems.

TRANS. 7

WILLIAM SELWYN - Rupert Allan

Fri. July
7th, Caernarfon

R: What did you think of the exhibition?

W: It was quite well attended. I was quite impressed with many of the pictures. The format of paintings and poetry together is interesting and new. It appealed to me when I was invited to do the work. It was well-hung, well spaced-out etc. It was Gwynedd Tomos who contacted me. I like Ivor Davies's work. I have also enjoyed discovering R.S.Thomas. I had some sketches to work from, which I then developed, once I read the poetry.

R: Why this particular poem? / Is there any other poetry which, with hindsight, you think might go just as well with this piece?

W: As above, really. I remembered my previous sketch when I read the poem. I came across this gentleman ('Lonely Farmer') in a field and he immediately stood to attention when I started drawing. I thought it fitted in well with the poem. I also had taken a photograph. I particularly liked the first line of 'Winter!' There may well have been another poem that would have gone just as well with this harshness of subject-matter

which I try to achieve in this picture.

R: 'What happens when a work of art is created is something which happens simultaneously to all works of art that came before it'.

Did this project force you to change styles/depart from your usual themes/subject-matter?

W: They say I'm a watercolourist, but really my 'style' is in mixed media. Some of the work in the exhibition is symbolic. My subject-matter is traditional, I try to capture the mood, although I work quite freely. I didn't really have to change much to fit in with the poetry. Although the subject-matter is often 'dark' in the poetry, I didn't have to adapt much. I am very familiar with the places he writes about, so they coincided. Really my work is a direct illustration of the poetry, at least the lines at the beginning, but also it is an illustration of something I have experienced. So it's an illustration of my response.

R: How do you think / hope R.S.Thomas might respond to your paintings?

W: I'd like him to respond favourably, and would hope that he would think that I had caught the 'mood' of his work. It's something which was brought over to me when I read his lines. He may not like it! I don't know if he's been there.

R: 'Ideologies' - It could be said that some of R.S.Thomas's poetry is 'didactic'. What were *you* trying to achieve/is there a specific message?

W: Just in trying to achieve the mood of wildness, barren-ness, remoteness.

R: What were the visual influences in this painting? What are your influences? Painterly/Literary traditions - are there any interesting comparisons?

W: I like Gray, Goldsmith, Coleridge; perhaps the 'fantastical' element. But my painting is mainly 'realist'.

R: "Many of us weren't comfortable with what we were asked to do" (Leslie Jones). Were you?

W: Well I wasn't, to begin with, because of my unfamiliarity. I accepted the invitation to start with, and it turned out to be a good opportunity. I also paint outside, incidentally. Even notes don't help much, and sketches don't catch the light as it is. I am apprehensive of this aspect of painting, because 'verbalising' an image is never accurate.

TRANS. 8

R.S.THOMAS - Rupert Allan

Fri. August 11th.
Ynys Mon.

R: What was your reaction to the idea of the Plas Glyn-y-Weddw exhibition?

R.S.T.: Well, I didn't want to throw cold water on it; I wasn't able to go to see it because I had a tummy-bug at the time, but I have seen the catalogue, so I know what it's about.

R: You weren't enthusiastic about it. Why not?

R.S.T.: I don't think you can illustrate poetry any more than you can paint poems. It's one medium trying to immitate another... it's a kind of pastiche; I've done it myself, I've written poems about paintings - you know, based on paintings.

R: What *are* your reflections on, for instance, your own volumes, Ingrowing Thoughts, and Between Here and Now?

R.S.T.: Well, I thought they were successful. As long as I can make a good poem, that's the justification. It's a kind of translation, you see... W.B. Yeats said that if you can abstract from a poem in another language, then make a good poem in your own language, it is a justification. It's the same with painting - if you can make a good poem, based on a painting, that is a justification, and if you can make a good painting based on a poem, that is a justification as well.

R: A couple of the artists in the exhibition decided to adopt a completely alternative narrative.

R.S.T.: Well I approve of that, yes.

R: I have asked the artists the question 'What do you think R.S. Thomas's attitude towards your painting would be?', and some of them have predicted that their work would be an anathema to you (which is probably quite accurate); some said that they hoped you would see their painting in terms of a new narrative.

R.S.T.: Yes. Originally I was asked to chose the poems in the exhibition, but I said 'No, the artists must go ahead and chose the poems themselves, that they think they can base a painting on. That's not the way to go about it at all. If I had chosen that poem ['A Land', Painting: Iwan Bala], and said "I want a painting on that", I don't think that's 'factory' at all. But the painters had my books of poetry, and could read through them and find a painting. It's much the same as what I did when I published these 'Impressionist' poems in Ingrowing Thoughts. Looking over a wide spectrum of paintings, every so often I would think "Ah, I can make a poem on that."

R: In my work so far, I have been interested in the visual tensions in your poetry between the 'watcher' and the 'watched'. In that context, do you have any favourites in the catalogue?

R.S.T.: I don't really know enough about painting to criticise it, and I can't really say, based on the catalogue anyway. I'll go on record as saying that where you're dealing with two media, you've got to abstract. I'm not in favour of 'faithful reproduction'. Take a Welsh poem, now I'm not in favour of trying to translate that word-for-word into English; one has to make a good poem in English which has some relation to the Welsh poem. That *exactly* applies to painting.

R: You've learnt the Welsh Language as a Welshman. If you could write in Welsh, would you see your poems as closer to your subject-matter, as 'more authentic'?

R.S.T.: Well, I'm an old man now, and my earlier poetry was more naturalistic, it was more of an attempt to do landscapes and that sort of thing. I've become more abstract in later life, and I'm not so sure whether Welsh would suit my purpose any more. It's almost impossible

to say; if you are a native Welsh speaker, then naturally you've got your native instincts, but looking at it from half-outside, I just can't say whether I would have been able to say the same things in Welsh that I have said in my later English poetry. There's not a great deal of naturalistic landskip poetry in my later work.

R: How do you see your poetry in a modern context?

R.S.T.: I'm a contemporary poet, I mean I use modern English language, and I write in more-or-less a contemporary way; I don't use rhyme, I don't write on the whole in stanzaic patterns. What I write is a semi-'vers-libre', and I think you should experiment, and 'make it new'. My newest book, No Truce for the Furies, due this month on Bloodaxe has a 'Poetry Society' recommendation, and I have written a piece for the Poetry Society Bulletin which I am told is due out at the end of the month. I say things in that which are pertinent to my attitude towards contemporary English poetry.

R: Do you think it is a sensible approach, in the context of the exhibition, to look for meaning in the 'gap' between poem and painting?

R.S.T.: Yes, well you mustn't try to limit poetry. Poetry operates on as many levels as possible, and it is a very myopic way of treating poetry if you are going to try to constrict it to one level. If it can operate on several levels, and if people are getting several different things from it, well all the better. This, for instance, was a painting by Ben Shahn. The artist has based his painting on this poem, but the poem I wrote based on Ben Shahn was a different poem. I don't know why he has done this, but I concede that it is quite a productive line to trace the relationship between these different forms. Music, poetry and painting all have some kind of relation, whilst at the same time being *suigeneris*, but my tastes have certainly developed more in the region of abstract; I haven't much interest in naturalistic or figurative painting. What I have said in my article in the Poetry Society Bulletin is that I'm very opposed to the shallow, trivial poetry that is being written today. Presumably that is reflected in painting as well - and music, probably, if I knew more about music. We're coming to the end of a tradition which has been one of the great traditions of English culture. Poetry was more-or-less 'Queen of the Arts' in English culture, and now it has been pushed down into the bottom corner of some paper, and one resents this. People who write trivial poetry can't complain if it's treated trivially.

R: David Woodford, one of the artists in the exhibition, has perhaps a similar attitude about modern art. His opinion is that everybody is at the moment trying to 'reinvent' art for themselves; it is not feasible to do so, he says, and people trying to reinvent their own attitudes towards the boundaries in art eventually simply create something trivial and esoteric - completely useless as far as communication is concerned.

R.S.T.: Also Woodford is a naturalistic painter...

R: To return to the question of self-perception, one of the questions I have found myself putting to the artist is 'how do you see yourself as an artist?'. Are you, the poet, predisposed to comparisons between yourself and other artists?

R.S.T.: Well, artists - painters and musicians are freer, not being 'bound' by the language. It's the hyphenation in Wales that beggars everything up: the bulk of the population in Wales today likes to consider itself Welsh but it speaks English, and expresses itself in English. So problems arise where painting and music would not have them. If somebody can detect a Welsh element in some of these painters, then fair enough.

R: Certain people claim to recognise a specific style which is emerging in the work of 'insider' Welsh painters. What has been one of the most interesting aspects for me, finding out about art and the image in Wales has been the political process of English artists who have visited Wales to paint the landscape actually setting the tenets of art according to this; then the 'indigenous' Welsh painter having to paint *him/herself* in a way which will be understood according to this appropriation, these preordained structures. This leads to the question of an 'indigenous visual art' in Wales...

R.S.T.: The real enemy is self-consciousness; when I was young, it was the early days of the 'Anglo-Welsh Movement', as it was called. People who had to write in English because they couldn't speak Welsh were trying to *make* themselves Welsh, beating their chests and saying 'I'm Welsh, look you'. We've had to sort of grow through that period, and there's a similar attempt in painting to found a school of Welsh painters so that one can say 'Oh yes, this is definitely a Welsh painter'. It's self-consciousness which is militating against all that. I suppose I really lost interest in trying to be 'Anglo-Welsh'. I've said my piece in the past about these things, and now I just have to write my poems as they come to me, and the fact that they're English is just too bad. There's nothing I can do about it at this late stage.

R: How do you feel about the idea that within Welsh art there is too much constant focus on the same themes of 'naturalism' and 'nationalism'?

R.S.T.: Well perhaps an example of this is Kyffin Williams, who has painted the Welsh Mountains inside-out. He's known outside Wales, but as 'Kyffin Williams, landscape artist'.

R: The selection in the exhibition is of your early poems on the whole. How do you feel about the didactics of what occurs in some of the paintings?

R.S.T.: When I left Mid-Wales and came to live in the Llyn Peninsular, I felt that I had pretty-much said what I had to say, and I then became more involved as an activist in Welsh political life. Thus the railing against tourists and caravans in Gwyneth Tomos's 'The Small Window' is not necessarily what's in the poem, but what I stand for as a human being and as a Welshman.

R: On a more trivial note, what *is* your reaction to questions about a portrait of yourself?

R.S.T.: The problem is to avoid a naturalistic portrait, which is something which I definitely wouldn't want. I would look for a style that was somewhere between abstract and naturalistic. If you sit for a portrait, it's obviously got to convey who the object is, and I'm afraid

most of the Welsh painters I can think of would just sit down and try to reproduce me. I don't know if there's anybody in England who might do it.

R: Presumably you *would* want the painter to be familiar with your work. Portrait painting is a very pro-political activity; in the past artists have been employed by their patrons to do the work...

R.S.T.: Yes. Of course, the great competitor nowadays with the painting is the camera, and after all there is some brilliant photography. But the photograph is only of one frozen moment of the subject, whereas a great painter is going to give you the whole man as he sees him. It's not going to be just from one aspect, or one moment in time. The very fact that you're taking the time to sit for the portrait means that the painter will at least *attempt* to get inside your head. I just can't think of any contemporary painter that I would be happy to sit for. Anyway, there's plenty of scope for you in this subject: it brings in the question of translation, of dealing with different media, the question of background politics, background biographical detail.

R: I've taken your poem 'Looking Glass' as an introductory thought. How do you see the overall metaphor of 'reflection' in the poem-painting partnership?

R.S.T.: Well, mirrors are very fascinating things, and it depends how much time you've got to spend in front of them. Some people are so busy, they only just have a chance to take a peek in the mirror to see that their tie is straight, that there's no black on their face, and that sort of thing, whereas some people have more time: they are confronted by this image which makes them wonder 'is that the person?'. The mirror in a way is translating because it's your translation of the image that the mirror has taken. It's an endless regress in a way. Painters have done this in the past, and I'm inclined to repeat myself. Rembrandt did *innumerable* studies of himself and his wife. It's a legitimate activity, I think.



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