WALES AND THE DILEMMA OF R. S. THOMAS

Michael Ponsford

R. S. Thomas, as well as being the author of many volumes of exquisite verse, has spent his working life as a parish priest throughout rural Wales. Now, in his mid-seventies, Thomas has completed his migration north from Cardiff, the industrial city of his birth, and is at home on the Lleyn peninsula in North Wales. Lleyn is still a remarkably isolated place, despite its increasing attraction for tourists, who are drawn by the startling opposition of high mountains and sea, by the unspoilt rural landscape, and by the monuments which testify to the long and troubled history of this part of Wales. But the influx of tourists seems to have had little impact on the traditional way of life of the local people, and Lleyn is still a stronghold of the Welsh language and culture. Like much of rural Wales, it is an area of small farms, with some land given over to crops, but the higher ground, too poor to be arable, is left to be grazed by the ubiquitous sheep. R. S. Thomas' first, and for many readers

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Michael Ponsford, formerly of Cardiff, Wales, is on the faculty of Marlborough College in Wiltshire, England.

Editor's Note

Since the poetry of R. S. Thomas is less well known in this country, it may be in order to add a word of explanation. His poetry has long been honored in Britain by those who love good writing. As John Betjeman, Poet Laureate, wrote, Thomas' poems "improve on re-reading, a sure sign of lasting quality." Thomas is, I think, more a country poet than "nature poet." That is debatable, but perhaps what I mean can be indicated by noting that the quotation he assigned to accompany *The Stones of the Field* (1946) was this from the Book of Job: "For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field." Nature here is not Wordsworth's Lake District, but that of unyielding soil, harsh climate, stones and sweat, where survival is a considerable achievement. The language and imagery are incisive, as e.g. "Protestantism--the adroit castrator/Of art, the bitter negation/ Of song and dance and the heart's innocent joy..." I was introduced to *Song at the Year's Turning* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963) at the University of Illinois by Henry Summerfield, now a professor at University of Victoria. It was for me powerfully expressive and evocative of humanness far more than most contemporary poetry, especially that which is simply abrasive. It is gratifying to have Dr. Ponsford's analysis call attention to R. S. Thomas' poetry.

his finest, subject is his locality: it is with this landscape, and with these people, that Thomas has the greatest poetic involvement. But despite his preoccupation with his locality, his characteristic mood is one of detachment, and in contrast with the hill farmers' communion with the land, the poet is profoundly aware of his own alienation, from his country's culture and, correspondingly, from a solid faith.

I.

Thomas' sense of alienation means that he habitually views the landscape from a distance, as he contrives in "The view from the Window." The poem is essentially a sonnet that has been stripped of the conventions of rhyme scheme and rhythm, a form which Thomas often employs. It opens with an extended simile, comparing the landscape to a work of art: "Like a painting it is set before one,/But less brittle, ageless." The impersonal pronoun of this first line creates a sense of detachment, emphasized by the simile, for, like a painting, the view is framed by the window, and the speaker is not participating in the landscape. In the sestet, however, the poet and his audience (perhaps a dramatic audience, perhaps us, the readers of the poem) suddenly become more involved, through an emotional response:

> All through history
> The great brush has not rested,
> Nor the paint dried; yet what eye,
> Looking coolly, or, as we now,
> Through the tears' lenses, ever saw
> This work and it was not finished?

We are obliged to ponder about these tears. They could be tears of joy, resulting from our pleasure in witnessing a continued creation, in which our perception is a vital act. But they could also be tears of sadness at our detachment from the landscape. For the world outside the window is "ageless," and represents an endurability which is beyond the poet's own experience, for Thomas is always conscious of living in a particular moment--many of his poems, as we shall see, deal with circumstances at a particular time and place. Thomas, then, is aware of his alienation from the landscape.

But he is also aware of his separation from those people who have an intimate relationship with the land, and it is this fact which is acknowledged, and which the poet tries to transcend, in one of his best known poems, "A Peasant." It is an early poem, and is relatively conventional in form, having a constancy of line length, and a pattern of rhyme. The poem describes Thomas' archetypal Welsh hill farmer, who "pens a few sheep in a gap of

cloud." He is a contemporary version of the noble savage, linked to his environment physically, rather than emotionally, but lacking in natural grace and godliness. However, it is a mistake to argue, as Geoffrey Thurley does, that Thomas' peasant farmers are unfeeling and ridiculous figures, "as absurd as Beckett's tramps."[1] On the contrary, Thomas demands that we become aware of an affinity with Prytherch; but it is an affinity which we have lost, for while Prytherch epitomizes endurance, we (implicitly) are mutable:

> Yet this is your prototype, who, season by season
> Against siege of rain and the wind's attrition
> Preserves his stock, an impregnable fortress
> Not to be stormed even in death's confusion.

The military images vividly define Prytherch's relationship with the land, which is savage and recalcitrant. To achieve an affinity with the land, the farmer must partake of some of its qualities, but this does not detract from his status, for his communion with the land has been sanctified by time.

The optimism of "A Peasant" surfaces again in "The Face": this poem is more telling about the endurability of the hill farmer, for it accepts the peasant's permanence in a world of change, a fact which goes unacknowledged in the earlier poem. The opening stanza of "The Face" draws attention to the sense of time which must be overcome. The final stanza of the poem asserts that not only can this "slow journey above ground" be transcended, but also progress, the process of change itself. Again, Thomas finds something positive in the inertness and recalcitrance of the peasant, as he pictures him ploughing on the hills:

> Beneath him tenancies of the fields
> Will change; machinery turn
> All to noise. But on the walls
> Of the mind's gallery that face
> With the hills framing it will hang
> Unglorified, but stern like the soil.

It is interesting that Thomas distances himself from his subject here in the image of the painting, just as he does with the landscape in "The View from the Window." For it seems that such optimism about the sacramental union of man and land cannot be sustained except by distancing and generalization.

When he approaches these rural people more closely, he finds that his idealistic picture of them is shattered. In "The Hireling," for example, the pathetic figure that Thomas meets on

the road is materially and spiritually destitute: "he has lost all/Property but the grey ice/Of a face splintered by life's stone." And in "Tenancies," the poet discovers an unexpected link between the country people and their land:

> A savage agriculture is practised
> Here; every farm has its
> Grandfather or grandmother, gnarled hands
> On the cheque book.

Reluctantly, Thomas has to admit that his parishioners do not inhabit the world of pastoral--albeit a harsh pastoral--that he would like them to. Human oneness with nature has been lost, and the people are dominated by money and the machine.

II.

R. S. Thomas, then, is alienated from the land, and is also obliged to question his poetic exaltation of the country people for their union with the countryside. Furthermore, his alienation is paralleled by his isolation from his parishioners. It is not simply that Thomas cannot achieve the farmer's closeness with the land; there is also the feeling that the orthodoxy of his faith is irrelevant to these people. Thomas is, after all, an Anglican priest in a country which has no official church, and which has a tradition of Nonconformism. Thus when Thomas narrows the distance between himself and his parishioners, his idealized view of them is again vulnerable. Let us look at "The Fisherman" as an example. The poem about a "simple man" moves easily through its three stanzas, each of five lines, but poses the problem of the confrontation of priest with countryfolk. The fisherman seems unconcerned about his environment, feeling nothing for nature or the country-dwellers:

> One of his pleasures, thirsty,
> Was to ask a drink
> At the hot farms;
> Leaving with a casual thank you,
> As though they owed it him.
>
> I could have told him of the living water
> That springs pure.
> He would have smiled then,
> Dancing his speckled fly in the shallows,
> Not understanding.

This poem, however simple it appears, carries a wealth of associations, the most significant of which are the Biblical echoes. First, there is the reference to Christ's words: "whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall

never thirst" (John 4.14). Then there is the irony of the failure of the poet as a disciple of Christ, as he should be a "fisher of men." But Thomas is inadequate before such people, who cannot be reached through his faith. Implicitly, Thomas acknowledges that the failure is his own, for he does not deplore the fisherman's ignorance.

Such feelings of alienation recur throughout Thomas' work. There is this self-portrait in "The Priest":

> The priest picks his way
> Through the parish. Eyes watch him
> From windows, from the farms;
> Hearts wanting him to come near.
> The flesh rejects him.

In "Evans," the alienation leads to a feeling of guilt, for the poem closes with a reference to

> that sick man
> I left stranded upon the vast
> And lonely shore of his bleak bed.

In "Ninetieth Birthday," Thomas describes a visit to an old woman living in the isolated farmhouse in which she was born. Instead of celebrating endurance and communion with the landscape, as we might expect, Thomas questions these values:

> that old woman,
> Born almost a century back
> In that stone farm, awaits your coming;
> Waits for the news of the lost village
> She thinks she knows, a place that exists
> In her memory only.

The poem closes with Thomas' characteristic sense of helplessness:

> all you can do
> Is lean kindly across the abyss
> To hear words that were once wise.

This, then, is the dilemma of R. S. Thomas. He is capable of celebrating the sacramental communion that the country people of Wales have with the land, but only when he views both the people and the landscape from a distance, either of time or space. When he approaches his subject with more particularity, he realizes that there is little that is attractive in his modern world: it is dominated by the machine, and inhabited by a faithless people. As a poet, he is unsure where his focus should be.

III.

In examining the Welsh landscape and people, Thomas finds no resolution to his dilemma, and he is forced to examine his own mind, exploring the wider implications of the tension between history and the present. So we can discern a change of attitude around the middle of Thomas' poetic career: in "Groping," from *Frequencies*, he decides that "the best journey to make/is inward." Thomas' favorite image of nature's confrontation with modernity, the car in the countryside, is given a new, more general focus, the destruction of a stable, traditional world by the machine. In such a focus, Thomas' dilemma is not centered on the culture of Wales, but on the validity of faith, and the wider focus necessitates an abstract, mythological expression.

"Other," for example, offers this reinterpretation of history:

> God secreted
> A tear. Enough, enough,
> He commanded, but the machine
> Looked at him and went on singing.

Thomas' pessimism about the modern world is finely expressed, too, in "Soliloquy," a poem of similar visionary quality:

> And God thought: pray away,
> Creatures; I'm going to destroy
> It. The mistake's mine,
> If you like. I have blundered
> Before; the glaciers erased
> My error.

The colloquial tone of this poem only adds to its calm terror, as God's voice retells previous creation and hints at future destruction:

> I listened to you
> Too long. Within the churches
> You built me you genuflected
> To the machine. Where will it
> Take you from the invisible
> Viruses, the personnel
> Of the darkness that do my will?

The publication of the poems exploring this new, mythical treatment of Thomas' themes immediately brought a response of unease from the critics. Colin Meir is representative of them when he complains that in Thomas' changed aesthetic, "the language becomes more abstract; concepts replace images." Meir

goes on to condemn Thomas' poetic apostasy in unequivocal terms, saying that "this attempt at a kind of mythologizing is a large step from the anger directed against the constraining effects of mechanization in many of Thomas' poems about Wales; and it fails."[2] But other critics sensed that Thomas' development as a poet can accommodate such poems. Anthony Conran defines them as part of the mystical tradition, "the mythologies of the Dark Night, the imaginations of fear and guilt, the temptations of reason and the indulgence of despair."[3] Brian Morris find that "the God of these poems . . . is less a person than a postulate," and that "the created myths create their own sequences of complex images which accrete meaning from poem to poem."[4] Morris' essay includes a comparison of Thomas' art with that of Brecht, and concludes "that there is one great difference: Brecht is deeply concerned with time, with the moment, and Mr. Thomas is not."[5] This implies that Thomas has abandoned one of his poetic concerns--the discrepancy between the long time of the countryman's closeness to the land, and the modern age, epitomized by the destructive energies of the machine, and money.

IV.

But we would be wrong to assume that the countryside and inhabitants of Wales do not continually inspire Thomas' work, or that the poet has lost the ability to express his dilemma in concrete terms. The dilemma has certainly become more complicated, expressing not only the tension between past and present, but also the impermanence of spiritual insight. Thomas' sense of his irrelevance and inadequacy as a priest is emphasized by the inconstancy of his own spiritual life. A personal faith based on a visionary quality is haunted by long silences from God, by many absences of the Divine. In "The Empty Church," we witness the poet's frustration; he is aware that God has turned away from his creation, and so asks: "Why, then, do I kneel still/striking my prayers on a stone/heart?" But this fired question leaves the possibilities open, and the despair is not ingrained in Thomas, whose poet attitudes depend heavily on the mood in which he finds himself.

However, the decline of faith at the cultural level seems inexorable, and Thomas' dismay at his contemporaries' apostasy is realized in very concrete terms in "The Chapel," from *Laboratories of the Spirit*. Significantly, the opening stanza emphasizes process, with the implication of the importance of time's passing. The chapel has "a last-century greyness," and is a still point in an environment dominated by motion:

> The traffic goes by,
> and the river goes by, and quick shadows
> of clouds, too, and the chapel settles
> a little deeper into the grass.

The second stanza forms a contrast to this; Thomas nostalgically imagines a time when the chapel was the focus of faith, and hub of the environment:

> But here once on an evening like this,
> in the darkness that was about
> his hearers, a preacher caught fire
> and burned steadily before them
> with a strange light, so that they saw
> the splendour of the barren mountains
> about them and sang their amens
> fiercely, narrow but saved
> in a way that men are not now.

R. S. Thomas is careful to endow the scene with dramatic immediacy. The fact that "we are enjoined to see"[6] is significant, for the faith whose passing Thomas laments finds expression in the perception of beauty in the landscape. Consequently, the poem is not wholly pessimistic: there is something attractive to the poet about this "becalmed" chapel which is oblivious to process (once again expressed by the cars passing through the countryside), and which is slowly becoming a part of the landscape.

The phrase "aside from the main road" in this poem indicates how Thomas can achieve some stability in his dilemma, for he is seeking a way to avoid both the lure of history and the horror of modernity. Earlier in his career, in a sonnet entitled "Aside," he had implored his representative labourer, Prytherch, to do just this:

> Between better
> And worse is no bad place
> For a labourer, whose lot is to seem
> Stationary in traffic so fast.

Thomas finds that the problem of the validity of faith, too, can be solved by heeding this advice. In "The Bright Field," a sonnet from *Laboratories of the Spirit*, he achieves a crucial realization: he has neglected the beauty of creation. Just as in an earlier poem, "The Small Window," in which "a field trembles/with colour and goes out/In its turn," Thomas finds significance in the fleeting glimpse of the sun breaking through "to illuminate a small field for a while." But the poet realized that he has forgotten his own advice in "The Small Window," that such "wealth is for the few/And chosen." He now relearns the lesson of beauty, again asserting the futility of progress:

> Life is not hurrying
> on to a receding future, nor hankering after
> an imagined past. It is the turning

aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

The biblical imagery is thus closely associated with the poet's own experience; just as the burning bush was a sign of God's presence for Moses, Thomas finds his faith validated by the perception of beauty in the countryside.

Nevertheless, such a resolution is fragile, and offers no enduring solution to Thomas' spiritual dilemma. A reply to "The Bright Field" is found in "The Bush," one of Thomas' most recent poems, which employs the same fusion of Biblical and natural imagery as the earlier poem:

I know that bush,
Moses; there are many of them
in Wales in the autumn, braziers
where the imagination
warms itself.

The poem develops to a recognition that a faith founded on vision is ultimately a personal experience which cannot be shared by others. Once again, Thomas finds himself detached from his countrymen, and celebrating their past:

And in this country
of failure, the rain
falling out of a black
cloud in gold pieces there
are none to gather
I have thought often
of the fountain of my people
that played beautifully here
once in the sun's light
like a tree undressing.

Perversely, Thomas' faith is rekindled not through the church's liturgy, but through a calm personal experience in a neglected church, in the poem entitled "Llananno." The poet is perplexed about his habitual stopping at this church, but it is perhaps precisely *because* the church has lost its expected sacramental function, through neglect:

I keep my eyes
open and am not dazzled,
so delicately does the light enter
my soul from the serene presence
that waits for me till I come next.

The overall tone of this poem is one of acceptance. The church which the poet enters demands nothing of him in his role as a priest or as a poet; indeed, it is less a place for worship than an aspect of nature, for Thomas notes its reflection in the river which represents process, but not the attraction of history, for its "insistence" is "on a time/older than man." Thomas can accept too, that the spiritual experience is inconstant, and he acknowledges that he is usually part of the "speeding traffic." There is no tension between the car and the countryside through which it passes.

If "Llananno" discovers a limited solution to Thomas' spiritual dilemma in acceptance, acceptance, too, realizes a synthesis of his conflicting attitudes to Wales. In "The earth does its best for him" from *What is a Welshman?* we find the first suggestion of this, again in the image of the car reconciled with the countryside. The sonnet first describes a visit to a museum, and finds the poet denying the attractiveness of the past, in a reference to "the precipitation/of culture from dead skies." The poem continues:

> I return to Lleyn,
> repository of the condescension
> of time. Through the car's
> open windows the scent of hay
> comes. It is incense, the seasonally
> renewed offering of the live earth.

This sestet is refreshingly personal and calm, and the use of religious imagery to describe the countryside endows it with a spiritual quality that significantly unifies Thomas' most perplexing concerns.

Notes.

1. Geoffrey Thurley, *The Ironic Harvest* (New York, 1974), p. 164.

2. Colin Meir, "The poetry of R. S. Thomas," in *British Poetry Since 1970: A Critical Survey*, ed. Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt (Manchester, 1980), pp. 6-8.

3. Anthony Conran, "R. S. Thomas as a Mystical Poet," *Poetry Wales* 14, 4 (1979), 20.

4. Brian Morris, "Mr. Thomas's Present Concerns," *Poetry Wales* 14, 4 (1979), 37, 39.

5. Morris, p. 80.

6. Meir, p. 6.