
A Struggle to Find Religious Meaning: The Poems of R. S. Thomas

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I

Ronald Stuart Thomas (1913-2000) is well-known as a poet who played an important role in the reclamation of Welsh culture for the Welsh people through his understanding of the Welsh countryside and Welsh peasant culture. He also recognized the loss of identity that Anglicization had dealt to the people of Wales and tried to reclaim for them the essence of their culture as important Irish poets had done for Ireland. His legacy is a body of poetry which captures the essence of what it means to be Welsh and how a religious sense can be discovered even in the bleak Welsh settings.

R. S. Thomas was an Anglican priest who served the Church of Wales as a parish vicar or as a rector in several small rural churches before retiring in 1978. Born in Cardiff, in the southeast of Wales, he soon moved with his parents to Liverpool, until his family finally settled in Caergybi (Holyhead) in the northeast of the island of Anglesey in 1918. Brought up as an English speaker in the busy port of Holyhead, he began to learn Welsh toward the end of the war shortly before moving to serve as the vicar of Manafon. After ordination, Thomas served two curacies in the Marches: the first (1936-40) at Chirk, where he met and married the painter Mildred Eldrige, and the second (1940-2) at Hanmer, in Flintshire.

Thomas' first assignment as a country rector was at the little church of St. Michael and All Angels in Manafon on the edge of Wales. His assignment there lasted for twelve years from 1942, when he was twenty-nine, until 1954, when he was forty-one. It was at this place that he brought out the poems, *The Stones of the Field* (1946), *An Acre of Land* (1952), and *The Minister* (1955).¹⁾ These early works set the main theme of his creativity for the succeeding years—how to find a religious sense in human life.

Thomas' early poems show a concern for people occupied with drudgery: the hill farmer, the moorland sheep man, and the isolated laborer. A prototypical laborer in his early poems is the character Iago Prytherch.²⁾ We are introduced to Iago in the

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following lines from 'A Peasant.'

Iago Prytherch his name, though, be it allowed,
 Just an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills,
 Who pens a few sheep in a gap of cloud.
 ...
 There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind.
 His clothes, sour with years of sweat
 And animal contact, shock the refined,
 But affected, sense with their stark naturalness.
 Yet this is your prototype, who, season by season
 Against siege of rain and the wind's attrition,
 Preserves his stock, an impregnable fortress
 Not to be stormed even in death's confusion.
 Remember him, then, for he, too, is a winner of wars,
 Enduring like a tree under the curious stars.

('A Peasant')

The countryman³⁾ is likely a small-scale farmer who uses only simple technology and whose primary livelihood is cultivation of the soil. The description of "the vacancy of his mind" is startling, but it aptly describes the lack of self-awareness and inarticulateness shown in his peasant life style. This is brought about by the inexorably binding of the peasant to the soil, no matter how difficult his lot may be. Thomas also describes a peasant's appearance in 'A Labourer.' 'Who can tell his years, for the winds have stretched/So tight the skin on the bare racks of bone/That his face is smooth, inscrutable as stone?' Under severe circumstances, continual hard work engenders a 'stark naturalness.' The problems encountered daily are starkly presented.

At times, the solidity and sturdiness of Prytherch seems to be viewed as being similar to the qualities of a soldier as Thomas introduces marital imagery⁴⁾ with the words "siege," "attrition," and "impregnable fortress." The character's unsentimental wisdom⁵⁾ born of the harshness of his life and his surroundings and his ability to endure toil and suffering earn respect for him. The peasant endures 'under the curious stars.' The stars are above us, and at certain times they have been seen to look down on us with an assurance of stability, expressions of an unchanging order. Needless to say, the interpretation of the words 'curious stars' has been the subject of controversy.

It is in the shadow of the farmer that the poet-priest finds himself compelled to conduct his pilgrimage. In fact, if the priest compares himself with the peasant, he

finds that he is often at a loss to know what to offer as a priest. Faced with the sufferings of his people, the priest despairs over the impotence of his language. It is a landscape within which people live and work. In a life as hard as that presented earlier, beauty and religion may be dispensable luxuries. These factors underlined his sense of isolation.⁶⁾

The long poem 'The Minister' demonstrates one position which Thomas recognizes and will continue to pursue in later volumes. The poem opens with the narratorial voice.

In the hill country at the moor's edge
 There is a chapel, religion's outpost
 In the untamed land west of the valleys,
 The marginal land where flesh meets spirit
 Only on Sundays and the days between
 Are mortgaged to the grasping soil.

The farms and houses, especially around Manafon Church, are usually surrounded by hedges which serve as windbreaks to keep out the blowing sand. Psychologically, these hedges define the limits of perception. Since vision inevitably interacts with the mind, the local people cannot be blamed if their vision is limited. In this setting, people are relentlessly forced to labor, leaving them little time or energy for the contemplation of spiritual things. The line 'The marginal land where flesh meets spirit' is tinged with irony. This phrase may seem to refer to a mystical union between body and spirit, man and nature, but it is only a fleeting dream. The narrator deliberately undermines this reading and curtails it—flesh meets spirit 'only on Sundays.'

After a subordinate clause, in the description of the bleak landscape in this part, there appears the main clause—'There is a chapel.' The chapel, although it is the subject, is overshadowed by the image of the 'marginal land.' As a result, the fragility of faith is emphasized. The nature of the land and the life it sustains challenges and resists mediation by the Christian mysteries. The question of whether to curse or to bless not only haunts the peasant, it haunts the priest and the poet, as well.

When the poet-priest conducts his services he often feels that the words he has to offer have no power.

We stand looking at
 Each other. I take the word 'prayer'
 And present it to them. I wait idly,

Wondering what their lips will
 Make of it. But they hand back
 Such presents. I am left alone
 With no echoes to the amen
 I dreamed of. I am saved by music
 From the emptiness of this place
 Of despair. As the melody rises
 From nothing, their mouths take up the tune,
 And the roof listens. I call on God
 In the after silence, and my shadow
 Wrestles with him upon a wall
 Of plaster, that has all the nation's
 Hardness in it. They see me thrown
 Without movement of their oblique eyes.

(‘Service’ from *Pieta*, 1966)

Thomas often appears to look back to a time when man and nature coexisted in harmony; a time when man was close to nature and to God. Faced with such harsh conditions, however, in nature despite its loveliness, and in his own life, a religious message may have seemed to be nothing more than a hard, cruel joke. In their reading of the landscape, the peasants do not find God at all; but neither do they find God in the chapel. The poet is aware of the gap in his education which is making life difficult for him. He shows us his cries of despair.

The poet comes to realize that the meaning of the peasant’s relationship to his surroundings is itself a matter of mediation, but his value which the peasants set on this landscape is governed by how well it can supply their needs. They do not project any symbolism onto the landscape; it does not speak to them of God. It is a hostile world, and they in turn are hostile to ideas of God.

II

How, then, can any religious sense be mediated in this bleak landscape? We come to notice the bewilderment of the poet’s about what to make of the life we see above, at the same time, the poet’s bewilderment about how religious utterances are to be mediated in such situations. In the unequal contest between peasant and the elements, if taken as a metaphor of the human condition, what hope is there for Iago Prytherch or the poet? Does the peasant possess the wisdom to acquire more refined sensibilities, or is the poet imposing on the peasant knowledge which he does not possess? Thomas does not give us an satisfactory answer.

The poet has assumed that nature must enter these lives in certain determinate ways, and is annoyed when the fact of the peasant's life contradicts this assumption.

I know now, many a time since
 Hurt by your spite or guile that is more sharp
 Than stinging hail and treacherous
 As white frost forming after a day
 Of smiling warmth, that your uncouthness has
 No kinship with the earth, where all is forgiven,
 All is requited in the seasonal round
 Of sun and rain, healing the year's scars.

(‘Valediction’ from *An Acre of Land*, 1952)

The grim reality sometimes allowed the poet to understand the depopulation of the hills. ‘Leave it, leave it’ (‘Depopulation of the Hills’). The poet is not only advocating leaving the farm but he has, in a sense, grown impatient with his subject. He despairs of extracting any sense from the peasant's situation. Yet, born of this very despair is a compassion for the peasant; a compassion also born of the realization that he can do nothing for the peasant.

People actually live with God who lurks behind, just like the sea does its business without comment or divine elucidation. —God does in silence. On the other hand, in the church, the prayers didn't respond to the priest's words and silence prevailed on the assembly. Thomas keenly felt failure to communicate the living word to them and was thrown into a gap between the two “silences.” When the poet-priest “analyses the quality of its silences,” he recognizes that there is more comfort in firmer, more intelligible readings of the world.

Often I try
 To analyse the quality
 Of its silences. Is this where God hides
 From my searching? I have stopped to listen,
 After the few people have gone,
 To the air recomposing itself
 For vigil. It has waited like this
 Since the stones grouped themselves about it.

(‘In Church’)

Silence and our inability to find answers, may hide God from us, so we resist accepting the silence by making God more congenially understandable to us. This

attempt to penetrate the silence, to find truth, makes finding a point more difficult. Silence, in this view, is an obstacle to faith because no point is forthcoming. The silence of God with which the poet struggles is one which is not accessible. The poet gradually revises some of his assumptions concerning the meaning of the “silences.” He discovers that the sense of God’s grace must be mediated through suffering and compassion. Faced with such austerities, lack of understanding, ambivalences and far-off saintly ideas, the priest’s exercise of his ministry is itself a stumbling affair. There is too much hesitation and ambivalence in the sentiments which come to the surface.

...

Prompt me, God;

But not yet. When I speak,
 Though it be you who speak
 Through me, something is lost.
 The meaning is in the waiting.
 ('Kneeling')

Two elements of approach are embroidered in this poem; one is the awareness of the self and the other is the loss of this awareness. We note the deliberate placing of line endings, the sudden break in communication. The juxtaposition of two words—‘speak’ and ‘lost’—implies an affirmative and accepting response to the silence. The abrupt line ending also indicates that for those who do not recognize the nature of this silence there is nowhere else to go, nothing left to say, but for those who accept the silence, the experience expands. In terms of the visible and the elusive, the poet’s experience develops. The silence seems more meaningful to the poet because speech involves loss, but in fact the waiting and the speaking are the *via negativa* and the *via positiva* to each other. What is actually required is a ‘speaking’ which is informed by silence and a silence is noticed by ‘speaks.’

The impossibility of finding adequate images gradually leads Thomas to reject language as a medium of revelation altogether. Thomas seems to be creating multiple images of God, and always reminding us of the impossibility of finding the one which is beyond all images. If praise is a positive response to the Ultimate Reality, then in this context the stillness—which is without language—is praise.

In the mode of the *via positiva*, Thomas attempts to harmonize the disparate images of nature with God. To quote ‘Swifts’ below, the naïve identification of the birds (swifts) with landscape and with God serves to express the poet’s own conviction that there is a deep and more complex connection between the two, and also frames that conviction in a way which is meaningful and accessible.

Sometimes they meet
 In the high air; what is engendered
 At contact? I am learning to bring
 Only my wonder to the contemplation
 Of the geometry of their dark wings.
 ('Swifts')

God communicates his presence through a means other than language, and the poet responds also without resort to language. In this poem, birds are integrated with God.⁷⁾ A sense of "wonder" or praise is the intuitive response to God which relies neither on knowledge nor on language. It is an intuition which he rarely ascribes to the peasant. The poet perceives that swifts (birds) symbolize God and nature is held in a healthy balance.⁸⁾ We have no direct proof of God's existence, but we do have evidence of his existence in his works. In view of the poet's acknowledgement that through the birds and flowers 'one gets/A little close to nature's heart' we might anticipate a sacramental attitude to nature.

In later years, Thomas regarded his early poems as a kind of "propaganda" and felt a great regret at having spent his time in that way. This recognition led him to publish the 1972 collection titled *H'm*. From the publication of this work, his poems have become laboratories of the spirit, where language is tested by being put under the moral microscope in an attempt to determine the conditions on which religious belief is possible. Thomas' vision of redemption flowers slowly from his descriptive exercises. For in his view, salvation is a statement of the truth and thus there is something redemptive in description as such. The vital power to describe the truth is an act of God for the restoration of humankind.

III

From trying to understand the countryman as a man and making him a symbol of the relationship that existed between man and the earth in the contemporary world of the machine, R.S. Thomas turned to taking an interest, in the history of Wales, her political and social problems, and his own situation as a Welshman who had to communicate in English. The poet witnessed signs of the evaporation of Wales and Welsh culture and this observation became entangled with his search for deeper resolutions.

...

There is no present in Wales,
 And no future;

There is only the past,
 Brittle with relics,
 Wind-bitten towers and castles
 With sham ghosts;
 Mouldering quarries and mines;
 And an impotent people,
 Sick with inbreeding,
 Worrying the carcase of an old song.
 ('Welsh Landscape')

The conflict from which the poems spring was complicated by psychological tensions, and widened into a conflict between an old order based on the land and the modern world of the machine, and, in Coleridgean terms, between imaginative and mechanical modes of apprehending reality.

Take the countryman Iago Prytherch once again. He seems to be an idiot from the description, but the words "vacancy of his mind" have a profound meaning. It was not just the very 'vacancy' of his mind that enabled Thomas to construct his poetry, finding his deepest concerns in Prytherch's life on the land in Welsh border country, and using Prytherch to conduct a quarrel with himself. We may better understand the depth of the poet's desire for cultural integrity if we consider the vehemence of the images of Welsh character traits. The peasants were the inheritors of Wales' cultural memory. The resistance of the "native" Welsh to literature written by Anglo-Welsh writers resulted not only from their ignoring the land issue but also from the unfavorable stereotypes given to the Welsh by artists and writers of the ascendancy class and of the English themselves. The stereotyping of the Welsh flows from an English belief in "racial superiority." R.S. Thomas was convinced that in order to create a national literature, Welsh writers must be familiar with the Welsh country, the nation's very heart.⁹⁾ The character of Iago Prytherch, however, succeeded in creating stereotyped images of Wales and its culture. Iago could express his native essence to the people of Wales themselves and to the "sophisticated people," who, they believed, lacked a sense of Welsh cultural identity.

In similar cases in Ireland, W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge considered the "real" Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to be synonymous with "peasant" Ireland. They wrote about the landscape—Yeats of Sligo, Clare, Galway, and, Synge of Connemara, Wicklow, and the Aran Islands—customs, personalities, songs, stories, and expressions that gave the locality its character and through which they could express the people's spirit. Just as Yeats hoped to free himself from contemporary poetic diction by turning to traditional or primitive forms of the language, Synge also looked to the peasants to find a theme for his art.

The writings of these Irish poets in English encouraged R. S. Thomas in his aspiration of fulfilling the role of a traditional Welsh poet. In this respect, Thomas did indeed play a leading role in creating an English-language literature based on the model of the Welsh literary renaissance, with the aim of bringing what were perceived as Welsh cultural values to a non-Welsh-speaking reader.

T. S. Eliot defines a "satellite culture" in his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* as "one which, for geographical and other reasons, has a permanent relation to a stronger one." R. S. Thomas has called it a "blood transfusion" to "the aging body of English literature."¹⁰ Thomas looks on Anglo-Welsh literature not as a means of magnifying the Welsh influence through English culture, nor as a way of "leading people back to the mother-tongue."¹¹ That means the Welsh may help themselves by helping the English. By limiting his nationalism to the cultural sphere, and to the restitution of Welsh literature, he maintains his quest for God.

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.
 ...

(‘Welsh Landscape’)

What is found when the earth is overturned is the history piled in layers. What the poet had perceived in the land of Wales, besides its beauty, was the result of past conflict — sacrificial blood, the blood of the Welsh tribe. To switch metaphors, it reveals the poet putting down his foundations,¹² building up many layers of literary and personal experience.¹³ Past sacrifices have helped to create the spiritual relation between people and land. The generations are bound together in a chain of inheritance. In a sense, the spirit itself is present in the land, like blood dyeing the rivers. The poet senses not only the intersection of the past and present, but the intersection of human time and divine timelessness, the interplay of human endeavor and divine will.

R. S. Thomas should pray not for an amelioration of the people’s lives, nor for a renewal of faith, but for grace. It is grace that he most needs to meet what as both poet and priest he sees as his life’s task—to mediate God to his people. This concept of the poet-priest as mediator between God and his people is central to the position he develops in his writings on religious poetry.

[Notes]

On your retirement, Professor Ohara, I'd like to express my hearty thanks to you.
You have been a great mentor to all of us.

- 1) It was here at Manafon that R.S. Thomas became conscious of the conflict that exists between dream and reality. Here, the 'little bourgeois, well-bred, with the mark of the church and library upon' him, found himself 'amongst tough, materialistic, hard-working people, who measured one another by the acre and by the pound, Welshmen who had turned their backs on their cultural inheritance. R.S. Thomas: *Autobiographies* (Phoenix, London, 1998), p. 11.
- 2) Iago Prytherch is the subject of eighteen poems, mainly quite short (the variation is from eleven lines to thirty lines) but found with a fair degree of regularity until 1961, after which there have been only four.
- 3) Using the word "peasant" would be a more accurate word, but the contemporary connotation prevents its use.
- 4) According to Justin Wintle, "during the war, farm labourers were generally excused from military service on the grounds that their ordinary occupation was too vital to the war effort to be entrusted to feebler hands." Justin Wintle, *Furious Interiors Wales, R. S. Thomas and God*. (Fleming, Glasgow, 1996.) p. 185.
- 5) As Thomas' poem 'Too Late' articulates, machinery use in the country has changed the exchange system of labor between large farmer and small. The payment of money for services allows more individual freedom to each side of the contract. Prytherch is one of the last of the independent men.
- 6) In 'No-one' Thomas ascribes the depopulation of the Welsh hill-country and poverty and social deprivation to 'English oppression.' (*Autobiographies*, p. 58-9.)
- 7) In 'The Minister' Thomas uses the cliché of the bird singing in praise of God. Cf. Wordsworth 'To a Skylark': Pouring out praise to the Almighty Giver, / Joy and jollity be with us both!
- 8) R. S. Thomas waited patiently for a long time for fear of losing the rare bird, because he did not know when it would come by. Thomas thinks "it is exactly the same with the relationship between man and God that is known as prayer. Great patience is called for, because no-one knows when God will choose to reveal Himself." (*Autobiographies* p. 100.)
- 9) According to Thomas, the Anglo-Welsh writer faces the choice of writing in English or "committing suicide as a true writer" *R. S. Thomas Selected Prose* (Seren, Bridgend, 1995) p. 137.
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 42-3.
- 12) Thomas' mastery of the Welsh language freed him from the need to announce his Welshness through the subject matter of his poetry.
- 13) The word "boundary" has a profound meaning for R. S. Thomas, whether it refers to the natural barrier of the invisible one of the border between England and Wales. There exist the areas known as "Marches," the scene of interminable warfare and dispute between England and Wales during the Middle Ages.