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'Not Hurrying On'
RSThomas – the last country parson

'Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past.'
(The Bright Field CP p.302)

1. Introduction - 'The Bright Field'

The Bright Field

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone away
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
the treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. 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.[1]

The poem 'The Bright Field' will serve as a focus for what I want to say, under three main headings. The first is the sense of journey. In the poem, Thomas is travelling. On the way he sees and notices the bright field, but passes by. So first we shall examine the story of RSThomas's life and work.

Second, the sense of a receding future. Here we shall look at the themes of seeking, progress, and the ultimate disappointment of the non-arrival of the future.

Third, imagined pasts. Thomas lived at a time of rapid change in a country with a rich past that lay in ruins around him.. Often characterised by interviewers as a hopeless traditionalist, in fact his work is often grappling with the attempt to

[1] CP p.302

move beyond pasts which can imprison by retaining only what matters and leaving the unnecessary baggage of yesterday behind.

Finally, as the poem's resolution suggests, we shall return to the idea of 'turning aside' to what we notice but often dismiss as we hurry on, failing to recognise the significance of that bush which is on fire.

2. Travelling

a. biography

Crockford's Clerical Directory could give you the bare bones of RSThomas's life: born 1913, graduated from the University of Wales 1935 (older editions would have informed you that he received a second class, division 2, honours degree in Latin from the University College of North Wales at Bangor); a year at St Michael's Theological College, Llandaff; ordination in 1936; two curacies on the Welsh borders, then three incumbencies, the first two in the Diocese of St David's, in mid-Wales, the last back in his birth-diocese of Bangor. Retirement and a licence to officiate in 1978; finally an address in a village on Anglesey. Such a bald summary of life in ministry would now need to be supplemented with a note of his death in late September 2000.

What perhaps stands out of the *Crockford's* entry is the Christian names: Ronald Stuart. It is hard to imagine anyone calling him by these, rather than his initials. His autobiography was entitled *Neb*, meaning 'anyone' or 'non-one', and throughout it he writes of himself in the third person as 'R.S.' He was no 'Ron', still less 'Ronnie', but the starkness of the initials draws attention perhaps to the surname: Thomas. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to see RS identifying with the name of the doubting disciple who yet becomes the first to say to Jesus 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:28) in poems like 'The Answer'.[2]

There is, of course, much that *Crockford* did not tell. His long marriage to Mildred E.Eldridge (Elsi), an English nature artist whom he met while at Chirk during his first curacy before the second world war. Elsi never seems to have softened the gauntness and isolation of RS. His poems do not deal in the tenderness of human love very often. Yet the moving final entry of his *Collected Poems,* and in some sense its epilogue, is 'A Marriage',[3] a testament to their relationship and to her, written after her death in 1991. Elsi 'who in life/ had done everything/ with a bird's grace' is identified with Thomas's own most characteristic metaphor for God, who is often described as a bird. Yet on being asked after her death whether he was now lonely, RS replied that he had often been lonely before it.[4] They had one son, Gwydion, born in 1945, educated in England to the astonishment and occasional ridicule of some who found RS's Welshness a pose. Even more to the astonishment of those who believed his image as a crusty and austere Old Testament prophet was his second marriage to the Canadian Elizabeth Vernon, who survived him.

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[2] *CP* p.359

[3] CP p.533

[4] Several of the poems in *Residues* (2002) seem to deal with the somewhat troubled marriage relationship, though of course it is important always to be careful in identifying any poem too strongly as autobiographical.

b. poetry

Thomas's first book of poetry, *The Stones of the Field*, was not published until he was thirty-three, after the war in 1946. More widespread publication of his work waited until he left Manafon in 1954, when the novelist James Hanley recommended him to Rupert Hart-Davis, who invited John Betjeman to contribute a preface to *Song at the Year's Turning: Poems 1942-54*, the first collection of Thomas's poems to be published in London. Thomas was a relatively late maturing poet. 'To a Young Poet', published in his fiftieth year, recognises that 'You are old now/As years reckon, but in that slower/ World of the poet you are just coming to sad manhood.'[5] By contrast his meteoric contemporaries Dylan Thomas and Alun Lewis, born one and two years after RS respectively, were both dead by the time *Song at the Year's Turning* was published, Lewis in 1944 and Thomas in 1953. The contrast with these two Anglo-Welsh poets of his own generation is marked. While they clearly represent the mood of the mid-twentieth century, RS is both more traditional in the pastoral setting of his early poems, and also more contemporary in the philosophical and spiritual concerns which his later poems explore. One of the extraordinary features of RS's work has been its consistent quality over more than half a century, and also his productivity. *Collected Poems 1945-1990* contains five hundred poems, and that is still less than half of his published output. Quantity matters, because although RS's work stands up well in anthologised isolation, its true timbre and tone can only be heard by listening to the sheer volume of his words. The spareness of the language has a cumulative effect and slowly the reader begins to recognise Thomas's voice, to hear the infinitesimal modulation and subtle variation of tone and mood. The work has a cumulative effect, and reflects obliquely Thomas's spiritual autobiography. There is a gradual softening and refining of an austere and troubled soul who raged against God who claimed him till the end.

The 1960s seem to have been a hard decade for Thomas, and are perhaps the crucial period in his work. His harshest poems are those which appear in *Pieta* (1966), reflecting his dissatisfaction with the parish of Egwlys-fach. In *Neb* he comments that 'his muse had dried up. Having kept on writing for a quarter of a century about the life of the countryside, and later about the condition of Wales, he had milked the subject pretty dry.'[6] A little later he reflects that, in the rural parish of Manafon 'he tried to write about the people of the country, searching for a symbol of mankind…but having reached Aberdaron, since there was no sustenance for his muse in looking back on Egwlys-fach, he turned increasingly to the question of the soul, the nature and existence of God, and the problem of time in the universe.'[7] There is some reflection of this change of direction in the

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[5] CP p.126.
[6] *Neb* p.73 (Wintle)
[7] *Neb* p.76 (Wintle)

division between the two collections: *Selected Poems* (1972) and *Later Poems 1972-1983* (1983).

The later poems, which were published after 1972, break out of conventional subject matter, but also increasingly out of the received forms of poetry, as if the themes cannot be contained by conventional patterns. They rely almost wholly on the ear (perhaps rather like the way in which a good preacher delivers a sermon) and often use the line break for effect within what could be a piece of prose. RS's poetic autobiography *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988) juxtaposes pages of prose and pages of poetry. He presumably thought the arrangement unsatisfactory, since nothing from this collection appears in the *Collected Poems*, but they make an interesting contrast: why are some passages prose not poetry, the reader asks? Justin Wintle comments 'It shouldn't be poetry, but in fact it is.'[8] Perhaps the elusive nature of the language mirrors the God of whom Thomas writes, who seems not to be there but then appears to have been hidden all along.

The change of theme in the late 1960s unleashed a flood of creativity, and RS's old age was his most prolific period. Since 1972 he published a book almost every other year, and the posthumously published *Residues* (2002) shows that his death at 87 interrupted a poet still in his prime.

[8] Justin Wintle *Furious Interiors* p.136

c. 'I have seen the sun break through'

C.S.Lewis once wrote a 'Meditation in a Toolshed' which began like this:

> I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it.
>
> Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, ninety-million odd miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.[9]

Examining RSTHomas's life and work in the factual way we have done so far is an example of looking at the beam. But 'The Bright Field' is about learning to look along the beam. It begins with the image of seeing the sun breaking through and shining on the field, objectively observed, passed by and forgotten. The poem's resolution lies in the realisation that turning aside to the illuminated field was what mattered, not hurrying on but savouring the moment; looking along the beam and being caught in the illumination of the field. Recognising these moments is, perhaps, especially the vocation of the poet, but it is shared with the prophet and maybe with all those of faith. But before we return to examine this in more detail, we shall follow the poem's structure, hurrying on to look at receding futures and imagined pasts.

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[9] C.S.Lewis *Compelling Reason* (Fount 1996) p.52, reprinted from *The Coventry Evening Telegraph* 17 July 1945.

3. Receding futures – 'bullying the horizon' and the machine

To imagine Thomas's work without the background of Wales is impossible. The landscape of hillside and sea shapes his verse, birds and animals skim across the pages, humans toil in the fields, and the shadows of decaying industry and mining are never far away. Thomas's life was a geographical tour of Wales, and for all its rootedness it was a restless life. Born in Cardiff, his first few years were peripatetic, including some time in Liverpool. There, he records in *Neb*, he got his first memory of Wales: 'One day on the beach at Hoylake his father directed his attention to a row of mountains far away over the sea to the west. "That's Wales," he said, in English.'[10] Wales was always the Western land, a home just out of reach on the horizon.

The identification of mountain and sea with Wales is strong throughout Thomas's work. His boyhood (from the age of 5) and also his last years were spent in Anglesey (*Ynys Mon*) which for him was perhaps the heartland of his Wales. Holyhead, where the family settled, was a town of contradictions: cut off by the sea yet also linked by railway to London, and with a harbour which welcomed ships redolent of exotic and distant ports (Thomas's father was a seaman). In *Neb* RS remembered that for 'anyone who lives in Holyhead, the most outstanding views are the mountains of Snowdonia, which stretch from Pemaen-mawr in the east to Bardsey Island in the West, over fifty miles of magnificent mountains, for the inhabitants of Anglesey a daily background.'[11]

Theological College in Llandaff took Thomas south to a place where he felt confined: there 'was nowhere to go for a walk except along the main road. There were no mountains, no open ground.'[12] This industrialised Wales was no Wales for RS. To him Cardiff was 'the capital of a fake nation'.[13] South Wales was hardly Wales, as far as he was concerned.

A curacy at Chirk on the Welsh borders followed. The gentleness of the hills, the distance from the sea and the proximity to England, together with the Shropshire accents of the people, combined with typical border mist, rain and cold, quickly bred a '*hiraeth* for Anglesey and the sea…a *hiraeth* that would influence him throughout the years to come.'[14] *Hiraeth* is a sense of longing, but also a nostalgia and homesickness. It again betrays that these places are nominal Wales for Thomas, not real Wales, the Wales of the heart. The longing drew him gradually west, eventually to Manafon in Montgomeryshire where he became Rector in 1942. The hills were higher here, and some vestiges of Welsh-speaking remained

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[10] *Neb* p.28 (Wintle)
[11] *Neb* p.33 (Wintle)
[12] *Neb* p.41 (Wintle)
[13] *The Echoes Return Slow* p.4.
[14] *Neb* p.43 (Wintle)

in the parish's remoter hill-farms, but it was still not home. After eleven years Thomas moved west again, this time to Eglws-fach, five miles from the sea and with a grand background of hills and the occasional glimpse of Cadair Idris. Yet, though it was 'a Welsh area in its appearance,'[15] it was dominated in RS's eyes by 'an English middle-class.'[16] The years in Eglws-fach were not happy, and it was with a sense of going home that Thomas was glad to be appointed vicar of Aberdaron in the Llyn peninsula. 'The appeal of Aberdaron' he wrote, 'was that it was so similar to Holyhead.'[17] The sea was visible and only half a mile distant; in the bay sits Bardsey Island, the 'isle of a thousand saints' of the Celtic church. RS had come home, and after retirement remained on the peninsula until a final move back to Anglesey itself, where he died.

In *Neb* he reflects on the journey in a way that is reminiscent of Eliot's words in *Little Gidding*:

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Thomas's Wales of the heart is rooted in Anglesey and the Llyn peninsula, and when he writes of Wales this is the landscape that he travelled deeper into all his life. Yet even this place was a disappointment: 'In the past the Llyn Peninsual had been for him a place of enchantment…but having arrived he found that it was an air force practice area.'[18]

Was the journey necessary? In the late poem 'Manafon' he reflects:

Have I had to wait
all this time to discover
its meaning – that rectory,
mahogany of a piano
the light played on? What
it was saying to the unasked
question was: 'The answer
is here.'[19]

His life had been a search for a sense of home, and in this poem he seems to recognise that perhaps there might have been satisfaction at hand all along. Later in it he speaks of how

The woman tended
a wood fire against my return
from my wanderings, a silent entreaty

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[15] *Neb* p.63 (Wintle)
[16] *Neb* p.64 (Wintle)
[17] *Neb* p.73 (Wintle)
[18] *Autobiographies* pp. 98-99.
[19] *Residues* p.35

to me to cease my bullying
of the horizon.

There was the sense with RSThomas that he always sought something more, something just over the horizon, chasing 'the Welsh rainbow'[20] in search of a future always receding before him.

A particular example of 'hurrying on/to a receding future' lies in the post-Enlightenment idea of progress, symbolised in many of Thomas's poems by the ravages of the 'machine' on the landscape of Wales. Much of Thomas's early poetry expressed the destruction of the old, agricultural way of life and the industrialisation that the 'machine' represented. The machine did, however, bring a brief but unprecedented prosperity which lasted perhaps a century. Lead prices, for example, collapsed in the 1870s and lead mines closed, leaving scars on the landscape and rural life seemingly destroyed for ever. The pattern was repeated later in the coal and steel industries. The dams and reservoirs for the thirsty industry of Birmingham also redefined the landscape and destroyed rich pastureland and a way of life that had lasted for centuries. At the same time the country parson's life was destroyed too,[21] in part by the machine age which paradoxically wooed the faithful from Anglicanism to non-conformity, a movement which itself collapsed when the machine age was over and people left. This movement is memorialised in countless gaunt and now often deserted Methodist and Baptist chapels spread across the countryside of Wales. The 'Machine' in Thomas's poems therefore stands for the Industrial Revolution which has subverted and then destroyed Wales by promising much and delivering little.

The industrial machine age had a philosophical counterpart in post-Enlightenment science and technology, which interpreted the world as a mechanism and thus disposed of the vibrant, passionate God of wind and water. The faith of this age adopted the ideas of progress to expect an ever-upward trend in society and spirituality alike. The reality is different, and Thomas's reputation as a 'traditionalist' perhaps stems from his reaction to the pragmatic concerns of much of the church during his lifetime. The God of his poems often seems a cranky and capricious individual, ill at ease with modernity (rather like R.S. himself). But there are more authentically Biblical overtones in such a raw and elemental portrait than in the benign watchmaker of Deism. It may be that in fact it is the relatively comfortable 'ordinary God' of Deism which is Thomas's target. Thomas's God may seem cruel and capricious, but he does care about his creation, and is passionately involved in it. In contrast with the Deistic God, Thomas has a Christian Trinity at the heart of many poems. The images he uses

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[20] *Residues* p.35.
[21] See 'The Country Clergy' CP p.82, and 'The Priest' CP p.196.

seem to fall especially into three: the Creator, who stands for the Father; the Tree, which stands for the Son; and the Bird, which often stands for the Spirit. The use of these images is, as always in Thomas's work, highly allusive, but they show how it is out of the Welsh countryside which Thomas made his home that God speaks to him. The real problem with the machine in Wales is the way it can, potentially, destroy the natural by taming or eradicating it, and in doing so remove the traces of God's existence which may be no more than hints of the creator in the force of the biting wind or the reminder of the cross in a bare tree on a hillside, or the sense of the Spirit as the messenger of God heard in birdsong. Hurrying on to tame God and pin him down to a definable future is what Thomas often recognises as the temptation. He uses the image of stone churches baited as traps to catch the deity with bread and wine; and in a late poem called 'Temptation' he writes:

> There are antennae within me,
> aerials not palpable to the touch,
> discriminative of the transmissions
> of a being that has nothing
> to apprise me of but its presence.
> Not a being either, but being,
> that atmosphere which, when I kneel
> down, I breathe like an oxygen
> of the spirit…[22]

Reflecting on the practice of prayer in his autobiography, he suggests that this was the major issue which he pondered as time went by and he grew older, and, he says, increasingly he 'became aware of the silence of God'[23] in the face of a world ravaged by the progress of the machine.[24] Here too a 'hurrying on/to a receding future' is exposed as folly.

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[22] *Residues* p.65
[23] *Autobiographies* p.107.
[24] cf. *Autobiographies* pp.108-109.

4. Imagined pasts - the Last Country Parson and the depopulation of the hills

> I see them working in old rectories
> By the sun's light, by candlelight,
> Venerable men, their black cloth
> A little dusty, a little green
> With holy mildew…
> They left no books,
> Memorial to their lonely thought
> In grey parishes: rather they wrote
> On men's hearts and in the minds
> Of young children…[25]

Thomas's own working life has been as he describes it in that early poem (1958). As such, in a parish ministry which extended from before the second world war until just before Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, Thomas was one of the last representatives of the 'country parson'. Many of his poems reflect that fact.

Justin Wintle speculates that Thomas sought ordination out of maternally-influenced material considerations. She had been raised in an Anglican rectory, and perhaps hoped for gentlemanly respectability for her son. A church scholarship enabled him to go to university, although the family were not noted church-goers. In the 1920s clergy still had a definite status within the community, and a relatively affluent lifestyle with good housing. Form his teens Thomas seemed destined for the church by his mother, though it is unclear how strongly he felt the call himself.[26]

Thomas was too awkward a man to fit comfortably the role of pastor. Yet he was also conscientious and disciplined and set himself to be the priest in the villages where he worked. In his autobiography he describes his simple philosophy and pattern of ministry:

> In every parish that he served R.S. carried out his work as diligently as he could. He was neither a popular nor a first-rate preacher, but he visited his parishioners regularly, especially the sick…Despite this, R.S. so arranged his time that he had quite a bit of freedom. He studied [theology and philosophy] in the morning, feeling that at that hour a priest should be found in his room.[27]

After lunch a country walk with perhaps some bird-watching, then in the evening pastoral visits.[28]

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[25] 'The Country Clergy' CP p.82.
[26] cf. Wintle pp.114-5.
[27] *Neb* pp.89-90, translated in Wintle p.335 (*Autobiographies* p.80).
[28] cf. Wintle p.228.

The image of pastor and flock perhaps stirred Thomas to recognise the kinship between himself and the remote hill-farmers of his first living at Manafon. A significant figure in the early poems is Iago Prytherch, the farmer who appears in the first major poem of Thomas's ever published, 'A Peasant'.[29] Thomas found that

> two-thirds of him was in sympathy with these people who had to be out in all weathers tending the land and looking after the animals that were as unmanageable as the people themselves.[30]

Thomas's ministry was lived as the old way of life died out. there are few if any Iago Prytherchs left today, and many of Thomas's best early poems take the destruction of their way of life as the subject.[31] Though not often expressed, he sees a parallel destruction of an old pattern of ministry which is described 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….
>
> Priests have a long way to go.
> The people wait for them to come
> To them over the broken glass
> Of their vows, making them pay
> With their sweat's coinage for their correction.[32]

Ronald Blythe, commenting on this poem, notes that this aspect of the life of parishes has been little noticed:

> I imagine this long line of minuscule spiritual rulers passing one by one through the lanes…calling out to all the generations who have occupied the farmhouses and planted fields…and I think of their equivalents from Zennor to Mey, a vast concourse of parsons, each confined to a few souls and their strictly ditched domain…Contrary to all that has been said and written of them the unassessable collective spirituality of some thirteen centuries of now unknowable parish priests must have left its own culture wherever we walk or look.[33]

The villages of Thomas's ministry are linked today with others as multi-parish benefices. The time and space and faithfulness in visiting which Thomas was able to have and do are gone. Like the hill-farmer's, Thomas's role has been extinguished. Yet knowing Thomas's character as we do, it easy to see that there

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[29] CP p.4
[30] *Autobiographies* p.52.
[31] e.g. the widely anthologised 'Depopulation of the Hills' CP p.28.
[32] CP p.196.
[33] R.Blythe *Divine Landscapes* (Harmondsworth 1986) pp.26-8.

can be a romantic glow cast over this imagined past of an age of faith, with virtuous parish priests covering every country lane.

Thomas has not just been a country parson, of course. He is also a poet in the line of English-speaking clergy-poets, as he recognises in 'Resurrections'. There he speaks of Herbert and Traherne, both country parsons, and also of Donne. Yet, he reflects, it was

Easier for them, God
only at the beginning
of his recession.

Herbert, besides being a sublime poet, also virtually invented the concept of the faithful parish priest in his book *A Priest to the Temple* (usually known as 'The Country Parson'). If Herbert is the beginning of the line, then perhaps Thomas is the end.

Hopkins
renewed the endearments
taming the lion-like presence
lying against him. What
happened? Suddenly he was
gone, leaving love guttering
in his withdrawal.[34]

The poet-priest wonders now what his role is, and how to speak of God who seems to have receded to the margins of existence, where he enters lives at funeral but few other places. Thomas's pattern of ministry, which sought an integrated identification of priest and people, is over, and who knows what lies ahead? It was dying as he conducted it, and that is why so much of his poetry has an elegiac feel to it. Churches are empty, God seems wholly absent from the world, and, it seems, as he says in 'The Moon in Lleyn':

Religion is over, and
what will emerge from the body
of the new moon, no one can say.

He shows us himself kneeling, and almost in despair in a church

full only
of the silent congregation
of shadows and sea's
sound. It is easy to believe
Yeats was right.

Yet, as he prays

a voice sounds
in my ear: Why so fast

[34] *No Truce* p.47.

mortal? These very seas
are baptised. The parish
has a saint's name time cannot
unfrock. In cities that
have outgrown their promise people
are becoming pilgrims
again, if not to this place
then to the recreation of it
in their own spirits. You must remain
kneeling. Even as this moon
making its way through the earth's
cumbersome shadow, prayer, too,
has its phases.[35]

The questions are left hanging in the air about what the next phase might be. In 'Poste Restante' (1975), Thomas notes that only a future reader 'will know what happened',[36] portraying a priest who rings a bell no-one hears in a church where few worshipped, among the ruins
of a culture they were too weak
to replace[37]

Against such a bleak background, however, come images of hope, as in the 1978 poem 'The Answer'. There the familiar picture of the machine comes into play as, we gather by the end, the question of resurrection is teased out in a search for the 'mechanism' that will open the doors to truth and enlightenment. But in the poem's second stanza Thomas asks whether it is actually through rational thought that the answer will come:

There have been times
when, after long on my knees
in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled
from my mind, and I have looked
in and seen the old questions lie
folded and in a place
by themselves, like the piled
graveclothes of love's risen body.

Within this bleak situation of the loss of all traditional landmarks the theme which seems to emerge most strongly is the need to be faithful in the here-and-now to the simple rituals of bread and wine and prayer, open to the moments when, turning from the imagined past, you may see
the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while[38]

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[35] CP p.282.
[36] CP p.272.
[37] CP p.272.

5. Turning Aside

Thomas's spiritual home in Angelsey, which was his actual home also in childhood and old age, is physically at the culture's end. The top left-hand corner of Wales, it lies close to the sources of Celtic Christianity in the Lleyn peninsula, where his last parish of Aberdaron overlooks Bardsey Island, the 'Isle of a Thousand Saints', and still in the twenty-first century a place of pilgrimage. Wales is proud to be the place where the British people were pushed back as the Anglo-Saxons invaded what is now England, and even further back in time, Anglesey was the site of the last stand of the Druids against Roman rule. Set within this context, we can see Thomas as a marginal man, perched on the furthest edge of the nation.

Thomas was a figure full of contradiction and ambiguity, easy to ridicule for his political statements and lack of integrity. He was both a fiery Welsh nationalist, who did not learn Welsh until middle age and never spoke it as a native.[39] He was a despiser of English, the *iaith fain* (the 'thin language'), yet wrote all his poetry in it and in his posthumous collection the final poem is about 'The greatest language/ the world has ever experienced.'[40] A man who claimed to hate the English as a race,

> Scavenging among the remains
> Of our culture[41]

inviting them to

> Come to Wales
> To be buried;[42]

and yet who married an Englishwoman and sent his (Welsh-named) son to an English Public School. A Christian pacifist who seemed to advocate the violence of the extreme nationalists.[43] A priest who made no secret of his struggles with God and his sometimes tenuous hold on belief,

> Doubtful
> of God, too pusillanimous
> to deny him.[44]

He was a man of ambiguity, riven with contradiction. As a politician this would, no doubt, be an appropriate source of criticism. But Thomas's contradictions perhaps held within them the seeds of his greatness and his gift to those who read his work. For though our ambiguities may be on a less heroic scale than his, they mean that his struggle to live between ideals and the compromises of reality

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[38] 'The Bright Field' CP p.302.
[39] Cf. Wintle *Furious Interiors* p.13.
[40] *Residues* p.70.
[41] 'Reservoirs' CP p.194.
[42] 'Welcome to Wales' CP p.197.
[43] Wintle pp.281-5.
[44] 'A Life' CP p.516.

are shared with us. In the late poem 'A Life', the only positive point he recognises in the description of himself is that he is

Good on his knees.[45]

R.S.Thomas himself chose his Welshness as the defining characteristic which set him apart: it was the matter of greatest passion for him. Being Welsh for Thomas meant being in exile, as the conclusion to his early poem 'Border Blues' shows. Having quoted from the old Welsh song *Y Delyn Aur*:

Ni bydd diwedd
Byth ar swn y delyn aur
[There is no end
to the sound of the golden harp, nor to its enchantment],

Thomas continues

Though the strings are broken, and time sets
The barbed wire in their place,
The tune endures: on the cracked screen
Of life our shadows are large still
In history's fierce afterglow.[46]

Some of the same emphasis runs through 'The Lost', a very late poem which is a lament. But what is it a lament for? It evidently reflects the Welsh experience, yet the introduction of an explicit Biblical reference ('And a little child….shall lead them'[47]) close to its end prompts the reflection that it might equally apply to Christians, a tribe which is also 'born lost', seeking a new language and being in exile in the contemporary world.

Thomas was a marginal and ambiguous figure, and his fervent Welshness legitimated his awkwardness, his lack of roots and fears about his identity, and became a metaphor for the wider human experience of not being at home in the world in which we live. As a Welshman in an English world he was always the outsider, in exile.[48] But his alienation sharpened his vision, and enabled him to see through what others take for granted, longing for a kingdom which is

a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on…
It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering

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[45] 'A Life' CP p.516.
[46] 'Border Blues' CP p.72.
[47] *No Truce* p.14.
[48] See especially 'The Creative Writer's Suicide', in *Autobiographies* p.23.

> Of your faith, green as a leaf.[49]

Jan Morris comments on 'A folk story from Llyn' which

> tells of a householder who has made the acquaintance of one of the *Tylwyth Teg*, the Fair People, the Other Ones of Welsh lore. When the Welshman expresses a desire to see the homeland of the *Tylwyth*, normally invisible to mortals, he is invited to place his foot on top of the fairy's: immediately, by virtue of the contact, an altogether unsuspected world is revealed in a chasm in the ground before him, with all its crowded streets and fertile fields, its smoking chimneys and its gleaming rivers twisting to the sea.[50]

The sense of 'an altogether unsuspected world' which lies beneath the appearance of reality is also a point of convergence between the ancient stories of Wales and the Christian story. 'The Kingdom' could refer to either the long buried reality of the *Tylwyth*'s Wales, or the kingdom of God revealed in the gospels.

This is a kingdom waiting to be revealed, just the other side of reality, seen in the bush that burns but which we too often ignore as we seek to hurry on or back to where we wish to be. Moses in the desert was in exile from Egypt, the land of his birth, and this is where, turning aside, God met him (Thomas's exegesis is sure at this point: in Exodus 3:3 Moses says 'I must turn aside'). David Scott, in a review of *No Truce with the Furies*,[51] compared RSThomas with the prophet Jeremiah, one of the great prophets of exile. Perhaps the greatest parallel with the concerns we have examined here lies in Jeremiah 29:4-7, the letter of the prophet to the exiles:

> This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

Here is a genuine turning aside. Building houses (which required learning how to build in the mud-bricks of Babylon, not the stone and wood of Jerusalem), planting gardens and eating the produce (which meant experimenting with new seeds they didn't know how to grow, and getting used to new textures and flavours they had not experienced before), and allowing marriages to take place in Babylon (not waiting till they could be celebrated properly 'back home'). The kingdom, home, may be wherever one is. As Thomas's late poem 'Manafon' puts it:

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[49] 'The Kingdom' CP p.233.
[50] J.Morris *The Matter of Wales* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1984) p.6.
[51] Printed on the back cover of the book.

'The answer
is here.'
…
It is a different truth, a different
love I have come to, but one
I share with that afflicted remnant
as we go down, inalienable to our defeat.

Looking along, not at, the beam. Seeking the bright field and knowing it is there. Letting the sun break through. These are themes with which Thomas struggled all his life, a man in exile and yet who finally seems to have recognised that the tension of catching a moment of balance and poise may be all that can be asked for or expected. 'Temptation' from *Residues*, the last poem in his work to deal with God, ends with the image of balancing

on the sheerest pinnacle
of the temple to which the machine
brings me, urging me to cast myself
down in to the abysm of secondary causation.[52]

Thomas's solution to the problem of feeling in exile is to recognise God in the moments of waiting, being open to the presence of the divine. And in this he may remind us of John amongst all the gospel writers. His poetry could be described in these words, used by Richard Hays of John's gospel:

> [I]n the Fourth Gospel *incarnation deconstructs dualism*. Despite John's wariness about the world, his theological vision is ultimately not docetic or hostile to creation. Rather, at the level of deepest theological conviction, the Word made flesh affirms the goodness and significance of creation. All creation breathes with the life of the Logos, apart from whom there is no life (1:1-4). This conviction finds subliminal expression in John's masterful use of elemental, earthy symbols to articulate the Word: water, wine, bread, light, door, sheep, seed, vine, blood, fish. The truth of the Logos is manifest only in and through the medium of these symbols. No other New Testament writing so vividly visualizes the eternal in, with, and under the ordinary. The effect of such archetypal imagining is that the ordinary is transfigured. (R.Hays *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1997) p.156.)

In Thomas's poetry, too, the ordinary is transfigured, and a patch of sunlight on a Welsh field becomes the gateway to

the eternity that awaits you.

Richard Cooke 21 September, 2002

[52] *Residues* p.65. cf. *Autobiographies* p.106.

RST 1913-2000

What was he seeking, all those years?
A tender embrace from a ferocious deity.
A home in a land both empty and colonised.
A language to speak things unsayable.
A love that might end his lonely rejection.
A faith that could light up a soul's dark night.

What did he find, all those years?
A contest like Jacob's, wrestling and blessing.
A journey with never a place to belong.
A second-best language, tongue-tied and awkward.
A love that was distant, with kisses as crumbs.
A faith out of fashion, a God who had gone.

So why do we read him, this gaunt Welshman,
Uneasy and strained by a world not his home?
His faith is our faith, his contradictions
Honestly, truthfully, often our own.