

The Mind and the Professing Poetries of R.S. Thomas

***Dr. Jitendra Bairwa**

My interest in Thomas perhaps also derived from my interest in Gandhi and the latter's attitude towards the Indian villages. Gandhi, who had a deep sympathy for the village poor and a strong sense of commitment to them, was also a severe critic of the habits and customs, which fettered them and impeded their progress. In the peculiar relation in which R.S. Thomas held the labourers and hill farmers of his early poems—a relation for which some orations use the facile expression “Love-hate relation”. I saw something of Gandhi's relation with the Indian villages. One more aspect that linked Thomas to Gandhi in my mind was his strong nationalism, his strong dislike for the English “colonising” Wales, and his intense desire for Wales to have an independent national identity.

The general development of Thomas's poetic approach is traced in the chapter “Dichotomies of Belief”. An offshoot of this development, his treatment of myths, is dealt with separately in a chapter entitled “Myths”.

The Stones of the Field (1946), An Acre of Land (1952) and The Minister (1953), as well as a number of other poems, later collected in Song at the Year's Turning (1955). The next four collections of the poems, Poetry for supper (1958), Tares (1961), The Bread of Truth (1963) and Pieta (1966), appeared while he was at his next parish, Eglwysfach. Aberdaron, his third parish, provided Thomas with a different kind of environment, and the impact of his change could now be noticed in his poetry also. Not That He Brought Flowers (1968), H'm (1972), Young and Old (1972), The Way of It (1977) and Frequencies (1978) were the collections published during Thomas's stay at Aberdaron. Three more volumes of his poems, Between Here and Now (1981), Later Poems (1983) and Ingrowing Thoughts (1985) have appeared since the poet's retirement from his Wales and for “[his] own race,” and he is “consciously and deliberately nationalist” in his approach as a writer. Judging against these criteria, R.S. Thomas stands as one of the most representative of Anglo-Welsh writers.

Before proceeding to the present study of R.S. Thomas's works it would be helpful to give here a brief biographical account of his life. R.S. Thomas was born in Cardiff in 1913. He attended the country school in Holyhead between 1925 and 1931. From Holyhead he went to the University College of North Wales from where he gained an Honours Degree in Classics. After graduation, he spent a year at St. Michael's College, Llandaff, training to enter the Anglican Church. In 1936—he became curate of St. Mary's, Chirk, near Wrexham. Here he met Mildred Eldridge, an art teacher at Oswestry School for Girls. They were married in 1940 and the same year moved to Hanmer in the eastern corner of Flint. In 1942 Thomas and his wife moved to the rectory in Manafon, near Newtown in Mid-Wales. In 1954 they shifted to Eglwysfach, a village twelve miles north of Aberystwyth where they remained for

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thirteen years. In 1967 he moved to Aberdaron, and lived there till his retirement in 1978 position in the church.

OBJECTIVE

A reading of Thomas's work revealed that his ideas are around three nuclei. The human conditions of labourers and peasants of Wales, represented by the figure of Prytherch, formed the first of these three nuclei.

I study the poet's explorations of the nature of the Deity, which form the second nucleus of Thomas's ideas.

The third nucleus of Thomas's Ideas, in my view, was his approach and beliefs towards search for knowledge of God's true nature as well as the search for experience of God himself. Thomas is a poet of dichotomy, and his personal search for knowledge and experience of God.

The most appropriate perspective for the study of Thomas's works may perhaps be to view him as an Anglo-Welsh writer in search of God or rather concept of God with his own approach towards science, religion and poetry.

The Human Condition

In R.S. Thomas's poetical works Iago Prytherch has been present from the very beginning. His name figures in the first volume of Thomas's were, The Stones of the Field, and it continues to recur in each successive volume of Thomas's Poetry till the publication of Fielia in 1966.

With the appearance of more and more "Iago Prytherch" poems in Thomas's successive volume there gradually emerged before his readers the image of a middle-aged peasant leading a life of hard struggle against the inclemency of natural elements in some remote hill farm of Wales. Stupid, ugly and dull, but at the same time patient and enduring, this man gradually came to occupy a significant place amongst Thomas's poetical works.

Facts, however, increasingly resisted Thomas's attempts to see romantic qualities in Prytherch. A number of poems in The Stones of The Field, An Acre of Land and song at the Year's Turning express the poet's annoyance at Prytherch's stupidity and dullness. What irks him most is the farmer's insensitivity to the beauty of nature scattered all around him.

It is really the poet's looking at Prytherch in this historical context that sometimes fills him with doubt about his stand regarding this peasant's future. Is it proper for him to see in Prytherch the revival of an age that exists no more? The poet thinks he is not keeping his eyes fixed on the man who prytherch really is and thus perhaps he is not doing him much good. Why shouldn't he see him smart and well dressed? Isn't his concept of Prytherch an anachronism? With the growing mechanization in farming is not the poet being reactionary in portraying Prytherch the way he does? Is it proper on his part to carve out such an outlandish role for Prytherch? Was his concept of Prytherch definitely superior to his fellow social and political thinkers' concept of him?

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Myth and the Nature of God

Myths have often been used by writers for presenting their personal of reality when it has not been possible for them to express through the expository language of rational though the complex, mysterious and sometimes paradoxical nature of this vision. Blake did so when he felt that he “must orate a system or be enslaved by another man’s” and therefore invented a mythology of his own intuitions, while Yeats did a similar thing when he proceeded to expound his own systematic mythology in A vision.

The long discussions of various artists, psychologists and anthropologists about the nature of myth indicate that the primitive myths resulted from the projection of an unconscious drama in the psyche of man, a drama which, in a way, provided him with a n explanation of the natural event. The following quotation from Blake is an illustration of a poet’s potentiality for creating new myths, the potentiality which lies in seeing a natural event not as a rational phenomenon but as an occurrence charged with spiritual and mythic powers.

Dichotomies of Belief (I)

In spite of the fact that R.S. Thomas’s served the Anglican Church as a clergyman from 1936 till 1978, he has not been, according to his own admission, an orthodox Christian.

Wales, then remains one of the most important concerns of R.S. Thomas in his poetry, Prytherch being only a part of this larger concern. The other important concern for this priest-poet, obviously visible to any of his reader, is nature of this other concern of Thomas.

There are two ways in which Thomas approaches this ultimate reality, and one of these is the mystic’s way. There are a number of referees in Thomas’s essays, poems and interviews to those moments of sudden illumination in which one is “blessed with . . . Glimpses of serenity.” The poet says in the John Ormond Interview.

In the course of his poetic Journey, thus, Thomas’s has advanced from his early doubts and ambivalent attitudes towards God to an acceptance of the present day scientific world. In the course of this progress he has stripped his poetry of the more traditional imagery,

Dichotomies of Belief (II)

Language and religious references: The most characteristic tones in his later works are those of the painful seeking for an elusive God, a seeking which involves the abnegation of all pleasure, all beauty, even of all positives and assurances. But while are like spiritual cases in this arid journey of later years. “Suddenly”, a poem in Laboratories of the Spirit (P. 32) can be cited as an example of the poet’s experience of the moments of sudden illumination and of his perfecting his language of negativity in order to express the presence of God who cannot be apprehended in ordinary linguistic terms. As one reads the following lines one can see how different in language, style, imagery and emotions they are from his other poem.

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Priest and Poet

Bedient's remark is largely true about Thomas's poem of the fifties and the sixties, but as we come towards the end of the sixties we feel that this briskly descending brook is now turning into a meandering river. The tone of the poem in Not That He Brought Flowers (1968) is calm and reflective and unlike most of the poems of the earlier volume, the poems of this collection usually begin with short questions.

The passing of seasonal tourists with their transistor radios across the almost timeless Pre-Cambrian rocks, the clash of the spiritual sense he derived from Bardsey with the noise of jets, and his thoughts about "the Jaws in the sea and the merciless warfare that goes on under its smiling surface" gave a new direction to Thomas's poetry. It is no wonder that this new experience coupled with his search for a new form made use of similar myths for poetic purposes. If this use of myths was one important development in Thomas's style about this time, the other was his frequent use of scientific and technical words and concepts in his later.

That in spite of his poetic gift he does not have the mastery of the medium that should be the most natural for his thoughts and feelings has been a cause of constant regret to him. He believes that a language is closely linked to the people and the soil of the nation that uses it the country's streams, its woods, its leaves. It is an extension of the people's consciousness of what they experience through their senses.

However Thomas's believed that even an Anglo-Welsh writer could play a special role in the revival of his language.

Science in Thomas's Religious Poetries

From his first published volume in 1946, Stones of the field, Thomas has engaged in his poetry with the language and concept of modern science. For Thomas, Science and Religion are intimately connected since the search for knowledge and experience of God takes place in physical world that science teaches humanity to understand.

Poetry and religion must engage with science if they are to remain relevant to modern people. In his own verse, "as far as I have astronomy, relativity theory and nuclear physics, I have found images in poetry."

FINDING AND SUGGESTIONS

As suggested in the introduction, Thomas can neither be easily classed with the Movement poets nor can his poetry be properly evaluated in the light of the general development of British poetry since World War II. The only suitable perspective for the study of his work is perhaps by regarding him as a typical Anglo-Welsh poet.

Thomas's poetry is also deeply concerned with tradition. He seeks a way to be both modern and traditional by re-representing, renewing and reinterpreting traditional symbols.

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His work represents a significant renewal of Christian poetry in the inhospitable environs of the modern age. In any case as the voice of a Welsh bard singing of humanity's future and the modern unease due to the erosion of faith and traditional values his poetry has that element of universality which can take it not only across Wales or the English-speaking world but far, far beyond it.

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