

The Long Dialectic of Rain and Sunlight

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Those of R. S. Thomas' poems which can be called—if somewhat loosely—religious, are frequently variations of a dichotomy one term of which appears to have the poet's qualified approval. And our confidence in the integrity of Thomas' response to the complexity of his experience is sustained because, as we constantly discover, the preferred term in one variation of the dichotomy becomes the less favoured term in another. Sometimes, indeed, the less favoured term may even be identified with the overtly religious position. Nor are we required to share Thomas' faith; he is neither insistent nor didactic and consequently there is no problem of distinguishing between the poet and the believer. Indeed, R. S. Thomas is not only immune to the virus of apologetic religiosity but he sustains a dialogue in which faith and unfaith are held in unresolved tension. If his world clearly differs from the one we are familiar with in Larkin's *Church Going* it does so, not because it is fundamentally different, but because it is approached from a less familiar direction.¹

Curiously perhaps, since both are Anglicans, R. S. Thomas' poetry is quite unlike Betjeman's, and this is not simply a matter of technique, but has to do with attitudes, and especially their very different ideas about the importance of social artefacts. However much Betjeman deplores Slough's bogus Tudor bars he delights in the bricky beauty of small towns—the area formerly castigated by Hopkins as 'Oxford's base and brickish skirt' and in this—as in a good deal else, R. S. Thomas is closer to Hopkins. The mere physical threat is seen as having important spiritual implications, although for Thomas the pain is less acute, less fraught, and less creatively tuned to transmit the fleeting energy of living movement.

Whereas Hopkin's life as a Victorian Jesuit brought about a conflict between the demands of his religious vocation and that other vocation as artist—what Robert Bridges called 'the naked encounter of sensualism and asceticism', and, almost paradoxically, generated the tension which led to his vibrant bodying-forth of God's creative presence—for Thomas serving in the married Protestant tradition, and possibly influenced, albeit remotely, by Calvinist theology, such tension as there is tends to be projected into the poetry of contradiction—of rational and natural and divine standing in opposition to one another.² Thus when nature is placed in the scales against Christianity—and it is a fairly common juxtaposition—Christianity tends to be left with the colder associations.

¹R. S. Thomas' poetry is often regarded as sharing several characteristics of The Movement poets: austerity, ironic self-appraisal and an absence of enthusiasm for undisciplined emotion.

²Hopkins wrote: I cannot in conscience spend time on poetry. R. S. Thomas asks: All this time I spend writing poetry, shouldn't I be visiting the sick and persuading people who don't come to church to come? It gives an occasional twinge.

Under the smooth shell
Of eggs in the cupped nest
That mock the faded blue
Of your remoter heaven.

Children's Song

Sometimes Thomas seems to suggest that there is in nature such an elemental power that this in itself heals and sacramentalizes and all question of opposition disappears.

Is there blessing? Light's peculiar grace
In cold splendour robes this tortured place
For strange marriage. Voices in the wind
Weave a garland where a mortal sinned,
Winter rots you; who is there to blame?
The new grass shall purge you in its flame.

More often, however, as in *Pisces*, the balance tilts decisively against the divine and here it is not just the problem: 'If you are a bird of prey, its great beauty and speed, how much more beautiful it is than the prey. How do you equate this with the love of God?'³. It is perceptibly deeper, for in *Pisces* the beauty of divine creation is actually destroyed on the pretext of serving religion.

Who said to the trout
You shall die on Good Friday
To be food for a man
And his pretty lady?

It was I, said God
Who formed the roses
In the delicate flesh
And the tooth that bruises.

In the struggle to comprehend—or at least, to come to terms with the stark contradiction between his concept of a caring God and the fact that the pre-Cambrian rocks on which he rests his hand are six hundred, million years old, R.S.Thomas constantly re-examines the Creation mythology of Genesis. It is an area in which there is very little reassurance, for the power he finds is as unlovable as it is monstrous—God's unreasoning anger is directly opposed by the recuperative powers of nature.

What is this? said God. The obstinacy
Of its refusal to answer
Enraged him. He struck it
Those great blows it resounds
With still. It glowered at

³Interview in *The Guardian* for September 25th 1972.

Him, but remained dumb,
 Turning on its slow axis
 Of pain, reflecting the year
 In its seasons. Nature bandaged
 Its wounds. Healing in
 The smooth sun, it became
 Fair. God looked at it
 Again, reminded of
 An intention. They shall answer
 For you, he said. And at once
 There were trees with birds
 Singing, and through the trees
 Animals wandered, drinking
 Their own scent, conceding
 An absence. Who are you?
 He called, and riding the echo
 The shapes came, slender
 As trees, but with white hands,
 Curious to build. On the altars
 They made him the red blood
 Told what he wished to hear.

Echoes (H'm)

In a variation on the Genesis theme R. S. Thomas adopts the medieval idea that the serpent had a woman's head—presumably this humorous piece of chauvinism was not actually intended as a compliment—but his poem raises unresolved difficulties.⁴

And the face that was like a flower
 On the neck's stem . . .
 The crushed smell
 Of her hair

The serpent-woman speaks to man with 'the voice of his own conscience' and both the introduction of this term and the flower imagery suggest that she represents some good and life-enhancing force. Man's reaction is predictably alienated; he hangs on himself with his leaves silent 'waiting for God to see'. There is, of course, a suggestion of the crucifixion, but it is the sense of alienation from the natural order which remains strongest.

Thomas is rarely able to find a solution which enables him to 'see the seeds of Godhead' in natural phenomena or to celebrate the synthesis in which the fundamental dichotomy between man as an aspect of nature and the revealed character of God can be resolved. Perhaps only in one almost pantheistic lyric is there a sense of complete harmony.

It was like a church to me.
 I entered it on soft foot,
 Breath held like a cap in the hand.

⁴Examples are to be found in Chaucer and Langland.

It was quiet.
What God was there made himself felt,
Not listened to, in clear colours
That brought a moistening of the eye,
In movement of the wind over grass.

There were no prayers said. But stillness
Of the heart's passions—that was praise
Enough; and the mind's cessation
Of its kingdom. I walked on,
Simple and poor, while the air crumbled
And broke on me generously as bread.

The Moor (Pieta)

In a variant of the dichotomy R.S.Thomas opposes man's sense of the beauty of the world to the apparent cruelty and indifference of nature. We have already seen something of the discordance in *Pisces* and it remains acutely threatening:-

... One thing I have asked
Of the disposer of the issues
Of life: that truth should defer
To beauty. It was not granted.

Petition (H'm)

Something of the tragic disharmony of things is lightly and ironically treated in a poem on the theme of a funeral in which the mourners—

... stand about conversing
In dark clumps, less beautiful than trees

and begrudge the corpse

The simple splendour of the wreath
Of words, the church lays on him.

In Thomas' view beauty is generally both unappreciated and subject to arbitrary and indifferent destruction. The rose stipple of the dead fish fades before the child's uncomprehending eyes. Hopkins too had mourned that while the beauty of inscape was 'unknown and buried away from simple people' it was so near at hand if only they had eyes to see.⁵ In both *The Small Window* and *The Bright Field* Thomas is particularly concerned with the momentary vision—

... A hill lights ups
Suddenly; a field trembles
With colour, and goes out
In its turn.

The Bright Field is even more explicit that the moment's illumination is the pearl 'of great price' but lacks that precisely correct

⁵Letter to Bridges.

movement of fugitive delicacy which depends on the brilliantly positioned verbal-adjective 'trembles' for its effect. Generally, however, it is not so much the failure to see what is there to be seen, as the dichotomy between the indifference of nature—and clearly man's obtuseness is an aspect of this—and the expectations aroused by the concept of a loving and caring God. R. S. Thomas repeatedly circles the problem seeking a point of reconciliation and one senses that only some form of paganism or Hinduism might be capable of supplying an answer.⁶ If the balance is at all maintained it is because whenever love is introduced as one of the terms it is felt to be decisive. An obvious example of this weighting is to be found in the frequently anthologised poem, *On the Farm*, in which the first three verses dealing with futility and deformity are transformed by the abruptly unexpected conclusion.

And lastly there was the girl
Beauty under some spell of the beast.
Her pale face was the lantern
By which they read in life's dark book
The shrill sentence: God is love. *On the Farm* (Bread of Truth)

And elsewhere the loneliness and indifference of the universe is challenged by its passive acquiescence in the work of decoying souls by the sacrament of beauty.

... rising he broke
Like sun crumbling the golden air
The live bread for the starved folk. *Bread* (Poetry for Supper)

The image of gold and air accompanies the act of satisfying hunger and at the same time has wider associations. Whereas Larkin's employment of light and a glass of water is only partly ecclesiastical,

Where many-eagled light
Congregates endlessly

R. S. Thomas' use is both ecclesiastical and secular. There is a rich ambiguity in the word-texture. Not only is gold redolent of early sunlight shafting through an east window—of honey-coloured wafers touched into gold coinage by the light, but of air impregnated with the same sunlight and gulped down into the heart. Gold is both an attribute of royalty and the colourless colour of the heart of light in the sun.

Sometimes Thomas endeavours to bridge the chasm between the aspiration to love and the darker experience of maturity,

⁶There are many examples of ambivalent goddesses who may be worshipped under quite different aspects. Kali is both a destructive force and a love goddess.

And in the book I read
God is love—But lifting
my head, I do not find it
so. . . .

Which (Laboratories of the Spirit)

by suggesting that suffering is the only visible sign of God's love and concern, 'those red tokens with which 'an agreement is sealed', but more often, the indifference of nature and the absence of God remain absolute.

And the dogfish, spotted like God's face,
Looks at him, and the seal's eye-
Ball is cold. Autumn arrives
With birds rattling in brown showers
From hard skies. He holds out his two
Hands, calloused with the long failure
Of prayer: Take my life, he says
To the bleak sea, but the sea rejects him
Like wrack. He dungs the earth with
His children and the earth yields him
Its stone. Nothing he does, nothing he
Says is accepted, and the thin dribble
Of his poetry dries on the rocks
Of a harsh landscape under an ailing sun.

He (H'm)

The gap is too wide and words themselves contribute to the isolation as they fall short of meaning and significance, and the stark constipated rhythms bring us up against incomprehensible words speaking of incommunicable things.

and one said
speak to us of love
and the preacher opened
his mouth and the word God
fell out so they tried
again speak to us
of God then but the preacher
was silent reaching
his arms out but the little
children the ones with
big bellies and bow
legs that were like
a razor shell
were too weak to come

H'M

There is a possible solution when Thomas, in *Cain*, suggests that in fact God himself is present as the eternal victim and that failure and indifference are as close to God as the red tokens of an agreement—perhaps even closer.

. . . the limp head
The slow fall of red tears—they
Were like a mirror to me in which I beheld
My reflection.

Rather similarly there is the suggestion that the crucifixion was an opportunity for God to demonstrate his love by making himself obedient to the rules of material necessity which constitute the order and indifference of our universe. The concept is not perhaps entirely different from that theory of Duns Scotus which had so encouraged Hopkins; namely that God had willed from all eternity to be born as an act of love, and irrespective of whether or not man chose to sin. Here the incarnation occupies a central place in God's plan and man's redemption is almost incidental.

..... On a bare
 Hill a bare tree saddened
 The sky. Many people
 Held out their thin arms
 To it, as though waiting
 For a vanished April
 To return to its crossed
 Boughs. The son watched
 Them. Let me go there, he said.

The Coming (H'm)

A similar idea ironically presented, occurs in Amen.

There is no meaning in life,
 unless men can be found to reject
 love. God needs his martyrdom. Amen (Laboratories of the Spirit)

Parallel to the problem of reconciling God and the universe is the need to bring the natural world—here reverting to its position as a benevolent influence—into harmony with the new and essentially alien creation of scientific technology. In the course of a Guardian interview in 1972 R.S.Thomas argued that he had 'been dealing with the machine and the concept of deity—how you can connect the machine, which is potent with so much evil, with deity and omnipotence', but at the same time suggested that 'Even through the machine man is showing his divine nature'. More commonly, however, the connexion is not made and Thomas sees the machine as threatening and destructive. Clearly, Hopkins would have sympathised, since for him it was the form or inscape of things which revealed God's presence—that presence which 'individuated the constellations of the sky, the motion of bird or wind, the forms of cloud, leaf and tree'. And it was the sin of vandalistic man that in ravaging nature for profit he destroyed the inscapes of the world and shattered the airy cages of Binsey poplars. Thomas' concurrence is as evident in an early poem such as *The Minister* as in his later work, and comprehends not only the narrower connotations of the machine but its less obvious manifestation in the social sciences. Thus *St Julian and the Leper*:

..... contaminating
 Himself with a kiss,
 With the love that
 Our science has disinfected

Not that he brought Flowers

Elsewhere, and quite unambiguously, the machine threatens our inheritance and our future.

The nucleus
In the atom awaits
Our bidding. Come forth,
We cry, and the dust spreads
Its carpet. Over the creeds
And masterpieces our wheels go. *No Answer* (H'm)

The collection from which this was taken was first published in 1972, the year of the Guardian interview, and was particularly concerned with these problems. The machine has multiple associations.⁷ It is both the new technology which brings hordes of insensitive holiday-makers and weekend-cottagers to litter Wales and to violate not only the frontiers of remoteness but the scarcely less tangible frontiers of the human spirit, and at the same time it is the insidious menace of deterministic theories. Thomas asks how we can see man as 'a loving free creature' and characteristically, returns to the imagery of Genesis and sees man and woman, in alliance with nature, going out to face the danger:-

and together
Confederates of the natural day,
We went forth to meet the Machine. *Once* (H'm)

There is also the suggestion that because of the calculations of those in control of the world's laboratories God must be re-crucified.

But who were those in the laboratories
Of the world? He followed the mazes
Of their calculations, and returned
To his centre to await their coming for him. *Repeat* (H'm)

The lines are interesting in that they demonstrate R.S.Thomas' economic use of imagery. Mazes, having worked as a synonym for complexity, become the minotaur passages through which he returns to his centre and through which death will follow him.⁸ *Soliloquy* opens with God looking back over the creative process and castigating man for his duplicity and worship of evil (the machine).

Within the churches
You built me you genuflected
To the machine— *H'm*

⁷At a less serious level in *Welsh Summer* the machine is seen as victorious is a cocophony of horn-blowing holiday makers.

the land suffers the fornication
of its presence

⁸"All the mediatory gods that may be likened to the Word are. . . wearers of horns." (Simone Weil)

As it continues, however, there is the suggestion that—unawares—man is deluding himself that he can escape God, for in the final analysis the machine may turn out to have been another of God's innumerable disguises.⁹

... the invisible
Viruses, the personnel
Of the darkness that do my will?

The idea is carried forward and given a new dimension in *Other*. Here Thomas sees God as irritated by man's failure to recognize him.

There were trysts
In the greenwood at which
He was not welcome. Youths and girls
Fondling the pages of
A strange book awakened
His envy. . . .
He began planning
The destruction of the long peace
Of the place. The machine appeared. (H'm)

Ironically, as the machine commenced its song of money God became fearful that it would be too effective. When he commanded it to stop the machine world

Looked at him and went on singing.

If God himself is baffled clearly Thomas' poetry cannot resolve our difficulties and his attitude always remains as questioning as that revealed by the Guardian article.

'I've been through life in rural Wales and rejoiced in earth, sea, manure. It could be seen as the primitive pagan approach with man just as another creative part of life. I still rejoice in that, but unless I can see the seeds of godhead, the light of the spirit, I can no longer be satisfied. . . . Previously I saw death as the solution to life or a poem; now it's a question of breaking through that level. Since coming to live here and growing older, I have been wrestling with these intellectual problems—what do we mean by life, by God, how do we see man as a loving free creature.'

It is because Mr Thomas does not set out towards a preconceived destination that his poetry can absorb even such a suspect term as God without loss of integrity. The distances and irreconcilables of his dichotomies are those of our own mundane experience of knowing that we live in a world in which God himself is powerless (*God's Story*), art and poetry all too often contaminated, and where human creativity flowers most luxuriantly in the cause of destruction.

This pessimism informs Thomas' treatment of the dichotomy

⁹The final lines of *Emerging* which provide the title for R.S. Thomas' latest volume (1975) *Laboratories of the Spirit*, are curiously optimistic.

between Faith and Doubt and enables us to share a measure of his experience as a Christian even when we cannot follow him unreservedly. Those of his poems which are most affirmative tend to be grouped about specifically Christian themes of a traditional type. *In a Country Church*, suggests not only the low rays of winter sunlight irradiating an east window, but a vision of love as golden fruit on the tree of life. It is a Christian hope shot through with naturalistic and pagan associations.

To one kneeling down no word came,
Only the wind's song, saddening the lips
Of the grave saints, rigid in glass;
Or the dry whisper of unseen wings,
Bats not angels, in the high roof.

Was he balked by silence? He kneeled long,
And saw love in a dark crown
Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree
Golden with fruit of a man's body. *Song at the Year's Turning*

The vision is mediated by the extra-Christian dimension and by the unanswering silence. Similarly, in *The Belfry*, R.S. Thomas acknowledges,

There are times
When a black frost is upon
One's whole being, and the heart
In its bone belfry hangs and is dumb. (Pieta)

The suggestion that prayers may fall as 'warm rain' is tentative and open to question. In the same mood of highly qualified optimism Thomas can shoulder off a rather dated catalogue of human miseries with the claim that if we have the talisman:

Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf,

we can penetrate the kingdom where,

There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is healed. *The Kingdom* (H'm)

Parry combines tender sadness with intellectual dexterity and, like *The Priest* with its domestic imagery, reminds us for a moment of some fragment from Herbert.

You say the word
'God'. I cancel
It with a smile.
You make the smile proof
That God is. I try
A new gambit. . . . (H'm)

... There are other people
In the world, sitting at table
Contented, though the broken body
And the shed blood are not on the menu.

Not that he brought Flowers

In *The Priest* Thomas appears to see a vocation as setting a man apart and in some way wounding him—or perhaps it is the wound which sets the man apart and marks him for God's purpose.

'Crippled soul', do you say? looking at him
From the mind's height; 'limping through life
On his prayers—'

One poem in particular treats of a faith other than Thomas' own. *Ann Griffith* was inspired by the young woman (third daughter of a tenant farmer), who was born in Powys in 1776; lived less than thirty years and died shortly after giving birth to her first child in 1805. Ann's conversion—which in her circumstances meant abandoning the Established Church for Methodism—followed a youth of more than normal gaiety, and led to her writing a series of remarkable hymns. The same spontaneous delight in life and love speaks through these hymns as through Ann's earlier pleasure in dancing. She could write:

There he stands between the myrtles
Worthy object of my heart,

and R S Thomas reinterprets her experience and shapes the historical and biographical material with delicate interpolation of Gospel miracle and dialogue. God speaks to Ann beside the well and at the marriage feast.

So God spoke to her,
she the poor girl from the village
without learning. 'Play me,'
he said, 'on the white keys
of your body. I have seen you dance
for the bridegrooms that were not
to be, while I waited for you
under the ripening boughs of
the myrtle. These people know me
only in the tin hymns of
the mind, in the arid sermons
and prayers. I am the live God,
nailed fast to the old tree
of a nation by its unreal
tears. I thirst, I thirst
for the spring water. Draw it up
for me from your heart's well and I will change
it to wine upon your un-kissed lips.

As a subject Ann Griffith is untypical in her overflowing faith and Thomas is closer to our experience when he deals with the uncom-

prehending behaviour of those who turn blindly towards a church at Christmas. Here too are the familiar images: snow and bread and pain and the bleak landscape which contracts—

to the one small, stone riddled field
with its tree where the weather was nailing
the appalled body that had asked to be born.

Several poems serve as a bridge between the more confident assurances of Faith and the lonely perspectives of Doubt. In all such poems the question remains open—

whether the cross grinds into the dust
. . . or shines brightly
as a monument to a new era.

Thus while there is some superficial resemblance between *A Country Church* and *In Church*, the differences are more important. In the latter poem the vision is with-held and the priest, alone in the darkening church after the service, finds only,

. . . The bats resume
Their business. The uneasiness of the pews
Ceases. There is no other sound
In the darkness but the sound of a man
Breathing, testing his faith
On emptiness, nailing his questions
One by one to an untenanted cross.

A similar experience of fruitless waiting is presented in *Kneeling* (the imagery not unlike Larkin's *High Windows*) about which Thomas can only assert—'The meaning is in the waiting'

waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
for silence;

Not that he brought Flowers

Other poems which explore the area between Faith and Doubt include *After the Lecture* and *Dialogue*. Initially, *After the Lecture* confirms our scepticism.

I know all the tropes
of religion, how God is not there
To go to, how time is what we buy
With his absence.

but then postulates that God is too different to be caught in the meshes of a human concept. In the same way the emblems of God—the hawk and the dove—are too contradictory for rational comprehension. Faith lives in the residue of our failure to understand and the agony of the struggle:-

... souls brought to the bone
To be tortured, and burning, burning
Through history with their own strange light—

It is in *Dialogue* that the shadows fall at their longest and that God's reply to questions about the imperceptible ebb and flow of natural selection is least reassuring—

You were my waste
Of breath, the casualty
Of my imagination.

Laboratories of the Spirit

Perhaps this is because—and doubtless it is only part of the reason—Thomas by using the image of the laboratory is rejecting his own insight that God is to be found, if at all, through the heart and between the myrtles, rather than with the intellect. Thus the concluding lines would seem to be inherently contradictory.

... The heart has become
hard; I must experiment
with it a little longer in
the crucible of the adult mind.

Nevertheless, we are grateful that in carving a difficult meaning R.S.Thomas should make so few concessions to our sentimentality.

R.S. Thomas's poetry

Song at the Year's Turning	(1955)	Haft-Davis
Poetry for Supper	(1958)	..
Tares	(1961)	..
The Bread of Truth	(1961)	..
Pieta	(1966)	..
Not that he brought Flowers	(1968)	..
H'm	(1972)	..
Laboratories of the Spirit	(1975)	Macmillan

This is not a complete bibliography, it includes only those poems referred to in the article.)

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which British capitalism is headed, a catastrophe that would not, as some ultra-leftists seem to imagine, automatically lead to the birth of socialism but on the contrary to the overt defence of capitalist interest by military force, such as we see in the right-wing dictatorships of Latin America and the Far East.

And shortly here in Britian we shall be asked to choose in a General Election between a party dedicated to the preposterous theory that the Social Contract has 'worked' and another even more firmly wedded to the interests of capital. It is time we had a real political party of sanity and some semblance of socialism.

H. McC.