

to the beginnings of our faith, to that event accomplished once and for all at a given time and a given place. At the risk of failing to be given access to the mystery of Christ, the mystery of faith, we must not go outside that sign. And that sign is one of those which we experience in being involved in it; we have access to the mystery of God in Christ when we *celebrate* the sign, when we activate it and actualize it. Which means, to repeat, that we have to allow its own internal rhythm to dominate us, to set the pace and the style, rather than to impose our own considerations on the once-and-for-all given. To some extent we must impose our own considerations like this: no such sign exists in the abstract, clinically pure, but only in a particular cultural setting, this one or that. But it could happen that we put into our celebration, our activation and actualization, of the sign too much of what does not properly belong to it, which then has the effect of obscuring the sign itself, rendering it hard and opaque and therefore less effective. The present renewal in the eucharistic liturgy can be seen as an attempt to remove some of the effects of such external intervention.

(To be continued)

'Generously as Bread': A Study of the Poetry of R. S. Thomas

by A. M. Allchin

The purpose of this article is to examine the poems of R. S. Thomas and to attempt some exegesis of them from a theological point of view. So far as I know, this has not been attempted before. Naturally enough, the poems of this writer have already received considerable attention from a literary viewpoint, and critics and reviewers have established certain of their more obvious characteristics: their spare diction, their rich imagery, their hardness to the touch, the quality of perfection in some of the lyrics, their frequent mood of anger or near despair. The fact that the writer is a priest with a small country parish in Wales is, of course, always registered. It accounts for his concern with the countryside, with the difficult relationship between the life of the mind and the life of the land, for his concern with the past, present and future of the people of Wales. Doubtless there is much more to be done here. In this article however we shall not be doing it. Our purpose is rather to enquire into some of the underlying structures of Christian thinking which the poems reveal, and what their significance may be for the Christian believer who is trying to think through the meaning of his faith. Whatever else may be uncertain about R. S. Thomas, it is clear that he does not reveal his

deepest thoughts and feelings easily. We shall have to look beneath the surface for the heart of what he is saying.¹

Our method of approach will be to look at two words, 'air' and 'bread' which recur at a number of places in his writing, and more specifically 'broken bread' and 'crumbled air', images which at first appear separately but later tend to come together in striking juxtaposition. Air and bread are things necessary to man's life. Both are central to the mystery of Christian worship, at the heart of which Spirit is invoked on bread. We recall that in the New Testament the greatest exposition of the theme of the bread of life is linked with the theme of flesh and spirit (John 6). In R. S. Thomas, the word 'bread' is of primary importance. One of his books is called *The Bread of Truth*, and the phrase itself occurs in the last line of one of the finest poems in that volume. It is a poem called 'Servant', a title which refers in the first instance to the peasant-farmer Prytherch, a recurring figure in the poems, with whom the writer is constantly in dialogue, and who has, we are told, served the writer well. The poem discusses the relationship between truth as it exists in the mind, and truth as it exists in act, both in man and in nature, a question again which is constantly recurring in these works. The former, freer and less tied, is characteristic of our own age with its constant movement and its unending search for development. The latter is the slower and more lasting reality and the intellectual apprehension needs, to be grounded in it, if it is not to run out into abstraction and unrelatedness, into frustration and despair. It is this which the farmer has helped the thinker to see.

Bread itself while it is made by man, yet belongs to the slower rhythm of life. It is made from the things of the earth, and the very slowness of its making suggests the turning of the seasons. Few things reveal the poverty and disorder of our affluent age more clearly than the poor quality of much of the bread which we eat. In these circumstances good bread, especially when it is baked at home, acquires a great significance. In an earlier poem Thomas had hinted of this, in speaking of slow farm-house talk

In the long kitchen, while the white dough
Turns to pastry in the great oven,
Sweetly and surely as hay making
In a June meadow.

(P.S., p. 47)

In 'Servant', having spoken of Prytherch's witness to the truth of man's life on the land

not just believing
But proving in your bone and your blood
Its accuracy,

¹R. S. Thomas has published six volumes of poetry: (1) *Song at the Year's Turning* (1955); (2) *Poetry for Supper* (1958); (3) *Tares* (1961); (4) *The Bread of Truth* (1963); (5) *Pieta* (1966); (6) *Not That He Brought Flowers* (1968). In this article we shall refer to them as S., P.S., T., B., P. and N. All are published by Rupert Hart-Davis.

the poet goes on to point out that this agricultural life is not

The whole answer. Is truth so bare,
 So dark, so dumb, as on your hearth
 And in your company I found it?
 Is not the evolving print of the sky
 To be read too; the mineral
 Of the mind worked? Is not truth choice,
 With a clear eye and a free hand,
 From life's bounty?

Not choice for you,
 But seed sown upon the thin
 Soil of a heart, not rich, nor fertile,
 Yet capable of the one crop,
 Which is the bread of truth that I break.

(B., p. 41)

Here the eucharistic significance of bread already begins to become evident, bread in its sacramental quality, uniting the different worlds. Like every priest, the poet is a servant, a minister, but like every priest who is true to his calling, he finds that he is served by those he is sent to serve, saved by those he is commissioned to save. As poet, one who knows the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings, he has in his effort to make articulate the deeper knowledge of man, to break the bread of truth, and himself to be broken in the process. As priest too he has to break the bread, which is the symbol both of man's life and of God's gift, or better of man's life as God's gift; bread which is made from what grows in the soil of man's being, a soil by no means 'always rich or fertile', but which even in its most unpromising aspects presents matter for thanksgiving, to the one who can break bread in the strength of him who in the night in which he was betrayed, took bread and gave thanks.

The reference to the eucharist, implicit in this poem, is made more clearly in an earlier one from the volume *Poetry for Supper*, entitled simply 'Bread', and at its end comes the crucial conjunction of bread and air which we intend to follow further. The poem must be printed in full.

Hunger was loneliness betrayed
 By the pitiless candour of the stars'
 Talk, in an old byre he prayed

Not for food; to pray was to know
 Waking from a dark dream to find
 The white loaf on the white snow;

Not for warmth, warmth brought the rain's
 Blurring of the essential point
 Of ice probing his raw pain.

He prayed for love, love that would share
 His rags' secret; rising he broke
 Like sun crumbling the gold air

The live bread for the starved folk. (P.S., p. 46)

In his isolation, his loneliness, felt very keenly by one who meets mostly with incomprehension in those he seeks to serve, and who is constantly conscious of his apparent powerlessness to impart a living, nourishing word, the priest prays out of great hunger. Not that he prays for some material gift. Man does not live by bread alone. Rather he seeks in his prayer to find that meat which is to do the will of him who sent him. To pray is, in itself, 'to know the white loaf on the white snow', an image suggested possibly by the eucharistic host lying on the white altar cloth, possibly by the bread scattered in winter for the birds, a human image of the indiscriminating generosity of God. He does not pray for warmth, for any sentimental blurring of the harsh and painful realities of life. As many have seen, a first reading of R. S. Thomas can give the impression of an almost morbid dwelling upon the harsh and ugly realities of sickness and death, inner and outer. But no, it is not morbid. God and life alike demand honesty and clarity, and the affirmations when they come have the greater force, because the darkness has been so truly faced. For there is more than pain. There is a love which involves no blurring of the outlines, but which still can share the secrets of man's rags and poverty; and in God's sight all our righteousness, let alone our sinfulness, is as filthy rags (Isaiah 64, 6). It is with this love and in this love, again the love of him who having loved his own that were in this world, loved them unto the end, that he can rise and indeed 'break the live bread for the starved folk'. He does this with a metaphor of royal generosity, 'like sun crumbling the gold air', again an image suggested perhaps by the experience of the celebrant standing at the altar, having risen from his knees, while the spring sun-light pours in through the east window of the church, catching the motes in the air.

'Like sun crumbling the gold air.' It is a striking phrase, and one which in different forms will appear again. The bread, the bread of truth and life must be broken, crumbled if it is to be made assimilable, and to become nourishment. The hard crust of the loaf must be broken before it can become our food. The Spirit too, the breath of life, if it is to become our nourishment must be made assimilable so that we can hear what is said 'each in our own tongue'. But whereas here the poet speaks of himself breaking the bread, and the image of air is used to illuminate the action, in R. S. Thomas's more recent poems where the images recur it is the air which has become primary, the bread which illustrates it, as if to suggest that the role of the priest is now seen less in active terms, and more in terms of waiting and expecting, waiting upon the action of the free Spirit, the air, the

wind which blows where it will. A poem called 'Kneeling' tells us much about the reality of prayer as waiting.

Moments of great calm
 Kneeling before an altar
 Of wood in a stone church
 In summer, waiting for the God
 To speak; the air a staircase
 For silence. . . .

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.

N., p. 32)

In terms of a traditional theology of the prayer of the eucharist, this would imply an Eastern rather than a Western view. The priest is no longer seen as acting *in persona Christi*, breaking 'the live bread for the starved folk', but rather as waiting with all God's people for the coming of the Spirit who alone can consecrate man's gifts.

From what has been said so far, it will begin to become clear that the role of priest, and the role of poet lie very close together in the work of R. S. Thomas. His poems, for all their reticence and indirectness in religious matters, do make use of the healing and reconciling words and images which are given to the Christian priest, and are able to restore to them something of their true content. It is true that the affirmations which these poems make would be trivialized if taken out of context, would cease to have their true value. Before resurrection must come death, and this is a fact which this poet will not allow us to forget. But out of this darkness comes light, out of the silence words can be spoken, which have their value precisely because of the silence from which they come. In all poetry, and quite specifically in this work, there is a healing function, both for the individual and society which perhaps only a wounded surgeon can fulfil.

Consider, you
 Whose rough hands manipulate
 The fine bones of a sick culture,
 What areas of that infirm body
 Depend solely on a poet's cure.

(P.S., p. 41)

The words and images which come within the poet's cure are not any words, but rather the primordial words, the basic images which reconcile and unite.¹ His message must always be, in one sense or another, 'Only connect'; it must always be aimed to open the eyes of the one 'who will not see, because he doth not feel.' He is to speak

¹On this, see Karl Rahner's essay on poetry and theology in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. IV, pp. 363 and following.

the primordial words, the original images, which open up reality, which pierce to the heart, and make present the universal in the particular. These are words which society and the individual alike must hear if they are to discover who they are. 'They are so to speak a *memory* we are born with and into which we are born: a store of meanings, of symbols, of signs. What is born in us is the connatural ability to understand these great buried signs as soon as they are manifested to us. What is given us in society is a more or less authentic manifestation of the signs. If society loses its "memory", if it forgets its language of traditional symbol, then the individuals who make it up become neurotic, because their own memories are corrupted by uninterpreted, unused meanings. The traditions themselves become mere dead conventions—worse than that, obsessions—collective neuroses. To replace one set of conventions with another, however new, does nothing to revive a truly living sense of meaning and of life'.¹ It is the poet who can sometimes give new expression and new articulation to words and images which then release the powers within us, and restore them to their fully human purpose.

These are the words which the priest also must use, and he can only use them with their full force when they have their true human content. Only in the fullness of humanity can the fullness of the Godhead be made known. Theology withers and must die when its words become mere technical terms, not rooted in the living experience of man. It is through the word of man that the word of God must be spoken. There must be an interaction here. In the light of the mystery of man's existence, we see the depth and strangeness of redemption. But in another and profounder sense, only in the light of the redemption can we read aright the true dimension of the mystery of man. The tragic question which this life poses, which all poetry and art at times explores, can be so dark, so fascinating, so terrifying that it is only through the prism of the life-giving death on the Cross that we are able to look into it. The two realities of creation and redemption, which come from the same God, illuminate and support one another. Restored to their created fullness, to their proper character, the great words of man's existence become apt to speak of the reality of God, and the unfathomable strangeness of man's existence points towards the ultimate mystery of things. The words and images are given to us which can convey truths and meanings which go beyond all words and images. Here there is indeed a marvellous interchange. Words which are holy with the holiness of the Church, of redemption, may yet turn back and be a source of light for our understanding of the depth and holiness of the world which God has made—this is a thought which runs throughout the whole poetic tradition of Wales. But again words which are full of the joy or sorrow of humanity may yet be taken up into the service of the joy or passion of God.

¹Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 145.

It is perhaps in a recent poem called 'The Moor' that this thought finds its finest expression. To compare the creation to a Church, as this poem begins by doing, to declare it to be a house of God, is not of course, a new thing to do, nor is it a mere literary fancy. It was a living element in the thought of many of the greatest thinkers of the earlier Christian tradition, one might think, for example, of Maximus the Confessor, one of the supreme exponents of this vision. It has again become a living element in current theology, at least in the work of Teilhard de Chardin. But it is primarily among the poets that it has found expression in our own century. David Jones has celebrated it in one way, Pasternak in *When it clears up*, the title poem of one of his last groups of lyrics, in another. Here is the statement of R. S. Thomas.

It was like a church to me.
 I entered it on soft foot,
 Breath held like a cap in the hand.
 It was quiet.
 What God was there made himself felt,
 Not listened to, in clean 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 cession
 Of its kingdom. I walked on,
 Simple and poor, while the air crumbled
 And broke on me generously as bread.

(P., p. 24)

The prayer which is uttered here is too deep for words. This is the silence of man's spirit, when the heart's passions are stilled, and the mind yields up its mastery of things. This is the silence in which God's Spirit speaks, and the stillness itself is the praise. 'Sometimes prayer gives birth to a certain contemplation which makes prayer vanish from our lips. . . . This contemplation in prayer itself has its different degrees and gifts. Up to this point it was prayer, for man's thought had not yet passed to the point where prayer is no more, into the state which is beyond prayer. The movements of the tongue and heart are keys. Then comes the entry into the bridal chamber. There mouth and lips are silent; the heart which controls the thoughts, the mind which governs the senses, the spirit, that darting bird, with all its powers and faculties, these all must fall silent here, for the Master of the house has entered' (Isaac of Syria). In that moment we receive the gift to be simple, the gift to be free, we find that poverty which is truly happy, in which all is gift, Spirit and flesh, air and bread, heaven and earth at one, in the generosity of God.