

The Halo Upon the Bones: R.S. Thomas's Journey to the Interior

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It is an unfortunate fact that mention of the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas to Americans is still likely to produce such responses as who? or don't you mean Dylan?¹ Although R.S. Thomas was born a year before his better known namesake and has been turning out poetry of very high quality since the nineteen forties, he has lived a relatively quiet and contemplative life. He has not made a practice of visiting the United States for protracted tours of poetry readings and drinking, and he did not take the precaution of dying romantically, poetically, and pathetically young. Perhaps because of this, his successes are only barely audible in the United States. And yet in Great Britain his poetic reputation today easily eclipses that of the "other Thomas." Certainly in Wales his position as the pre-eminent Anglo-Welsh poet is secure. For young Welsh poets, particularly those disposed to write in the English language, R.S. Thomas is nothing short of a poetic guru. Peter Elfed Lewis has argued that "the achievement of R.S. Thomas in itself justifies the Anglo-Welsh poetic tradition"(quoted by Bianchi 73), while Tony Bianchi, himself an Anglo-Welsh poet, looks to R.S. Thomas rather than Dylan as "the dominant voice in the attempt by Anglo-Welsh writers to define an audience"(84).

In the larger context of contemporary British literature, R.S. Thomas's stature has also been recognized. Kingsley Amis goes so far as to call him "one of the half-dozen best poets now writing in English (dust cover, *Selected Poems*), an assessment echoed by A.E. Dyson (21). A critic for the *Western Mail* claims for Thomas a position "with the greatest poets of the century," and indeed, there have been a number of comparisons with Yeats and Eliot (see Bianchi 73).

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Figure 1: Thomas's Last Parish Church in Aberdaron

If a capacity for considerable and telling poetic development determines our judgment of a poet's stature, such claims may not seem unjustified. Since the appearance of *The Stones of the Field* in 1946, Thomas has written over twenty volumes of poetry, most recently *Preparations for an A-Men*, published by Macmillan in 1985. Although Thomas has confined himself to the rather narrow compass of the lyric, within this compass his growth and range have been remarkable. Thomas's development may usefully be seen in terms of his continuing exploration of place, his Welsh surroundings first, and later the subtle and interior terrain of the spirit. As his most recent poems suggest, though he may be more forgiving now, the fervor of his exploration is unabated. Old men, perhaps, should be explorers.

An intense consciousness of place, in particular of place in Wales, is what first sparks and informs the poetry of R.S. Thomas. Here the ancient and modern, the secular and spiritual meet one another and coexist—often uneasily. In the early

poem, “Welsh Landscape,” Thomas sets forth these concerns:

To live in Wales is to be conscious
At dusk of the spilled blood
That went to the making of the wild sky,
Dyeing the immaculate rivers
In all their courses.
It is to be aware,
Above the noisy tractor
And hum of the machine
Of strife in the strung woods,
Vibrant with sped arrows.
You cannot live in the present,
At least not in Wales. (*Selected Poems* 16)

“Welsh Landscape” can be read as a sort of overture to Thomas’s work, an early attempt to position himself, not merely in physical place, but historical place as well. In Thomas’s later works, this positioning becomes more intense and more problematical, as he tries to reconcile physical and historical place with man’s spiritual place in the modern world. The early books, however, concern themselves primarily with locating a starting point in the human world.

Indeed, the subjects of Thomas’s early poems are very earthly. His first efforts to establish and experience a sense of place issue in the poems about Welsh villages and farmers. These are hardly picturesque or pastoral images, however. The Wales of Thomas’s early poems seems claustrophobically small and small-minded; Thomas grants his subjects a certain dignity only by way of paradox. Iago Prytherch, a peasant character who appears in a number of poems, is described as “an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills ... with a half-witted grin” and “spittled mirth / Rarer than the sun that cracks the cheeks / Of the gaunt sky perhaps once in a week.” And yet, as Thomas reminds his readers, he “is your prototype, who, season by season / Against siege of rain and the wind’s attrition, / Preserves his stock,...he, too, is a winner of wars, / Enduring like a tree under the curious stars” (*Selected Poems* 11). Prytherch is no ideal pastoral man for Thomas—indeed, he shocks “the refined, / But affected sense with [his] stark naturalness.” But he is valuable, for one thing, in placing the refined and affected sense of Thomas and his readers, and also for his brute stoicism in the face of adversity. As in many of the early poems, Thomas’s attitude is ambivalent—some critics have taken it simply as condescending—hovering between admiration and disdain. Thomas is

certainly not concerned to romanticize the lives of the Welsh peasants. As Walter Llywarch, another of Thomas's characters puts it, his life in Wales is filled with

Months of fog, months of drizzle;
Thought wrapped in the grey cocoon
Of race, of place, awaiting the sun's
Coming, but when the sun came,
Touching the hills with a hot hand,
Wings were spread only to fly
Round and round in a cramped cage
Or beat in vain at the sky's window.
(Selected Poems 60).

Thomas's sense of the claustrophobic smallness of life in rural Wales is expressed also in a poem called "The Village." The village has "Scarcely a street, too few houses / To merit the title; just a way between / The one tavern and the one shop / That leads nowhere and fails at the top / Of the short hill" (Selected Poems 35). The village, a "last outpost of time past," fights a losing battle against oblivion, "the green tide / Of grass" that threatens it. Almost nothing goes on there, and yet it too is a place where living happens: "the girl who crosses / From door to door moves to a scale / Beyond the bland day's two dimensions." Like Iago Prytherch, the girl in "The Village" endures as something real, and as such compels Thomas's admiration:

Stay, then, village, for round you spins
On slow axis a world as vast
And meaningful as any posed
By great Plato's solitary mind.

The poet's admiration is paradoxical, however; he cannot help bringing together the ordinary and the sublime. Indeed, the irony is aimed in both directions here, but in most of the poems brute endurance is clearly not enough. Unlike Wendell Berry's farmers, who joyfully and even mystically establish their place on earth, the lives of Thomas's peasants are tragic and determined. The mind of the peasant in "Soil," who works his field "Plying mechanically his cold blade," is defined and limited by the bordering hedge: "only the sky / Is boundless, and he never looks up." Like Prytherch, he endures as a product of the soil, which to him "is all"; when he bleeds, his "blood seeps home / To the warm soil from which it came" (Selected Poems 17). In the early poems, Thomas's gaze is almost always

stern. As the title of one of his books, *Tares*, suggests, his countryside is not a pastoral landscape, but a place of weed-like plants used as fodder. Interestingly, tares were thought in Biblical times to stupefy the senses with their poison. Thomas's quest for the spiritual must struggle constantly with the stupefying inertia of matter.

Thomas's own place, as a pastor in this country, is especially ambiguous, and a number of poems try to stake out this difficult terrain. In "Those Others," he writes:

I have looked long at this land,
Trying to understand
My place in it—why,
With each fertile country
So free of its room,
This was the cramped womb
At last took me in
From the void of unbeing
(Selected Poems 67).

Thomas broods over the accident of his birth in a way none of the peasants he has looked at does. For him, the soil is not all, and he does not spring from it naturally, as Iago does, "like a tree." Having a mind for something more than his field is not an unmixed blessing, however. Unlike the peasants, he is quite aware of "the void of unbeing" from which he came and where some part of him at least is surely heading. The feelings engendered by this state are, as he suggests in "Those Others," alienation and hate: "Hate takes a long time / To grow in, and mine / Has increased from birth." Thomas is unsure, however, just what he hates. It is "Not for the brute earth," and not even (though he considers the possibility) for all of "my own kind, / For men of the Welsh race." His heart goes out to those others he calls "Castaways on a sea / Of grass, who call to me, / Clinging to their doomed farms," whose "slow wake / Through time bleeds for our sake." This is one of Thomas's difficult poems, its statements tentative, shifting, and provisional. Indeed, another poem, "The Cry" (*Selected Poems* 56), begins: "Don't think it was all hate / That grew there; love grew there, too." But "Those Others" expresses powerfully Thomas's more characteristic sense of alienation from his fellows and his place.

In a number of poems he considers the difficulty of his relations with his own parishioners, who do not share his most vital concerns. "The Priest" (Selected

Poems 106) is seen as an outsider moving among superstitious villagers, “limping through life / On his prayers.” He

picks his way
Through the parish. Eyes watch him
From windows, from the farms;
Hearts wanting him to come near.
The flesh rejects him.

Calvin Bedient has observed that Thomas’s peasants are “as opaque and unforthcoming as a spot of ink....Closing their doors to him as the farmers do, they leave him in the hollow vastness of the plausible. Dumb and distant, they perforce become a sounding board for his own changing guilts, humiliations, and arrogances....Yet he experiences this licence as anguish”(67). Thomas is certainly aware of the difficulty of his position. As “The Priest” suggests, he is rejected by the flesh before he may reject it. And the word “flesh” here is ambiguous: it implies, of course, the earthly life of the peasants, but there are overtones also of Christ, the word made flesh, the object of those prayers on which he limps. In “There,” Thomas tries to define himself as the pastor and poet of “those that life happens to” (Selected Poems 89). These people, for whom life is little more than “an experiment / In Patience,” can be expected neither to share his own faith nor to applaud his literary representations of them, and he resists, out of a kind of decorum, his temptation to pass judgment:

I have watched them bent
For hours over their trade,
Speechless, and have held my tongue
From its question. It was not my part
To show them, like a meddler from the town,
Their picture, nor the audiences
That look at them in pity or pride.

Thomas realizes that pity (which in its way is a form of pride) and prayers will not help the sufferings of the people. Yet his duty as a priest is to minister to their spiritual needs, and his duty as a poet is to record their sufferings. Thomas once wrote that

the ability to be in hell is a spiritual prerogative, and proclaims the true nature of [a poet]. Without darkness, in the world we know, the

light would go unprized; without evil, goodness would have no meaning. Over every poet's door is nailed Keats's saying about negative capability. (Quoted by Merchant 72)

A poem entitled "Evans" (Selected Poems 46) is Thomas's version of "Felix Randall."

Evans? Yes, many a time
 I came down his bare flight
 Of stairs into the gaunt kitchen
 With its wood fire, where crickets sang
 Accompaniment to the black kettle's
 Whine, and so into the cold
 Dark to smother in the thick tide
 Of night that drifted about the walls
 Of his stark farm on the hill ridge.
 It was not the dark filling my eyes
 And mouth appalled me; not even the drip
 Of rain like blood from the one tree
 Weather-tortured. It was the dark
 Silting the veins of that sick man
 I left stranded upon the vast
 And lonely shore of his bleak bed.

Unlike Hopkins, however, Thomas does not exalt the sick man, or his own ministry. Evans is left "stranded" in the dark that was always the fabric of his life. Watching life happen to this man, Thomas has no thought that "My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears"; indeed, he is not so much saddened as appalled at Evans' fate. Thomas respects the peasant's fortitude, and he retains his image—"That bare hill with the man ploughing, / Corrugating that brown roof / Under a hard sky"—but he realizes that "there is no applause / For his long wrestling with the angel / Of no name" ("The Face," *Selected Poems* 93).

And of course, Thomas has his own wrestling to think about—with the "silent" God who has preoccupied him increasingly since the publication of *Pietà* in 1966. As he puts it in "Via Negativa" (*Later Poems* 23), "I have never thought other than / That God is that great absence / In our lives, the empty silence / Within, the place we go / Seeking, not in hope to / Arrive or find." The difficulty of praying to a seemingly uncommunicative God had long been a minor theme in Thomas's work. As early as *Song at the Year's Turning* (1955), he was producing lines like these from "In a Country Church" (Selected Poems 43):

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.

The desire for supernatural intelligence struggles here against the sheer physicality of nature: the wind is simply wind, and the bats are simply bats, and God withholds His word from the supplicant. The poem presents the physical image, but not the spiritual substance of prayer. The location, like his rural scenes, is quite specifically Wales. The poems in *Pietà*, however, move beyond the physical limitations of a poem like "In a Country Church." The title poem, "Pietà," announces this movement through its ambiguity of place:

Always the same hills
 Crowd the horizon,
 Remote witnesses
 Of the still scene.
 ;br;And in the foreground
 The tall Cross,
 Sombre, untenanted,
 Aches for the Body
 That is back in the cradle
 Of a maid's arms. (*Selected Poems* 85)

A.E. Dyson, comparing this poem to "Western Wind" and "The Sick Rose," calls it "one of those rare short poems that keeps most of its secret"(6). Part of that secret, at least, has to do with the ambiguity of its setting. The first stanza of the poem could easily pass for a typical Thomas image of Wales. Only in the second stanza does the poet reveal that his setting is Palestine, and even here he is ambiguous. Is he imagining the historical scene itself, its representation in a work of art, or a contemporary scene, the modern world, as it were, aching for its past? On closer inspection, the only image verifiably present in the poem is the "untenanted" Cross. Thus our sense of the poem, like our consciousness of the religious experience it suggests, shuttles among these possibilities. Like the surrounding hills, we remain "remote witnesses" of the event, guessing or intuiting its significance. The "witness" of this poem, however, is interestingly different from the "witness" of the earlier poems about Wales. Its place is the consciousness of the poet. Unlike the image of prayer in "In a Country Church," the image

in “Pietà” is freed from its sheer and silent physicality and resonates *symbolically* in the realm of religious imagination. Another poem in the same volume, entitled “Kierkegaard,” speaks of how “the acres / Of [his] imagination grew / Unhindered” (Selected Poems 86), suggesting what Thomas intends now for himself. In place of the acres of Wales that furnished the settings of his early poems, the later poems of Thomas increasingly cultivate the acres of his imagination. This is perhaps what R. George Thomas had in mind when he argued that in Thomas’s later poems “the meditative ideas dominate over the visual images”(61).

It is certainly in the imagination that Thomas searches for the God whose “most consistent feature,” as Vimala Herman puts it, “is his absence”(713). The modern world, it becomes increasingly apparent, is not hospitable to God or spiritual salvation. “St Julian and the Leper” considers a kind of sacrifice no longer possible or even desirable in our society:

Though all ran from him, he did not
Run, but awaited
Him with his arms
Out, his ears stopped
To his bell, his alarmed
Crying. He lay down
With him there, sharing his sores’
Stench, the quarantine
Of his soul; contaminating
Himself with a kiss,
With the love that
Our science has disinfected. (*Selected Poems* 99)

This poem from *Not That He Brought Flowers* (1968), reveals a number of interesting departures from Thomas’s earlier practices. For one thing, Thomas’s verse form is more experimental than before, making use of severely enjambed free verse lines reminiscent of William Carlos Williams, which refuse to come to rest. Thomas also allows a deliberate confusion of pronouns to reign, suggesting Julian’s selfless identification with the leper. What is also new is the explicit ironic attack on the modern world. For traditional Christianity, the essence of Julian’s sainthood is his “contaminating / Himself with a kiss,” an image of Christian love. This love, however, has been “disinfected” by modern science. The efforts of modern humanitarianism remove ironically the central virtue of our humanity, our ability and desire to share the sufferings of our fellows. In the disinfected

world of the machine, sacrifice may no longer be necessary, but at the same time its spiritual benefits are no longer available.

In an aggressively secular world, the efficacy of prayer to an absent God may be questioned. *Not That He Brought Flowers* contains for the first time foreign landscapes, but these are as desolate as the landscapes of Wales. “Coto Donana,” “Burgos,” and “No, Señor” offer a kind of counter-Wales that is, if anything, more disturbing for being foreign:

We saw the asses
 Hobbling upon the road
 To the village, no Don Quixote
 Upon their backs, but all the burden
 Of a poor land, the weeds and grasses
 Of the mesa. (“No, Señor,” *Selected Poems* 109)

The awareness of an outside world does not so much liberate Thomas from his typical concerns as intensify the burden of his prayers. In “After the Lecture” (*Selected Poems* 103), Thomas asks: “From one not to be penned / In a concept, and differing in kind / From the human ... what can my prayers win / For the kindred, souls brought to the bone / To be tortured?” Thomas is not a mystic. His prayers, as Julian Gitzen argues, “are not intended as monologues,” but look for the divinity to “assume some tangible form”(2-3). God, however, is almost always silent. The poem, “Kneeling,” is typical in this respect:

Moments of great calm,
 Kneeling before the altar
 Of wood in a stone church
 In summer, waiting for the God
 To speak; the air a staircase
 For silence; the sun’s light
 Ringing me, as though I acted
 A great rôle. And the audiences
 Still; all that close throng
 Of spirits waiting, as I,
 For the message.
 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. (*Selected Poems* 107)

This poem makes an interesting comparison with “In a Country Church.” As in the earlier poem, the prayer is met with silence, but there is something more positive here than the poet’s desire jarring against the inanimate objects of wood and stone that surround him. The prayer becomes a kind of performance animating, if only into “waiting,” the audience of spirits. The action of the prayer is thus recognized to be separate from its meaning, which is said to reside “in the waiting.” The books of the early ’seventies, *H’M* and *Laboratories of the Spirit*, develop the more mature themes announced in *Not That He Brought Flowers*. In “Petition” (*Later Poems* 12), Thomas confesses his helplessness as an observer of life’s pain: “Seeking the poem / In the pain, I have learned / Silence is best, paying for it / With my conscience. I am eyes / Merely, witnessing virtue’s / Defeat.” God will not grant even an aesthetic satisfaction:

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

“Echoes” is a parable of God and pre-animate nature in confrontation. “What is this? said God. The obstinacy / Of its refusal to answer / Enraged him. He struck it / Those great blows it resounds / With still” (*Later Poems* 14). This sort of parable or fable becomes quite common in Thomas’s work at this period. Julian Gitzen notes that

the fables serve as a forceful reminder that Thomas’s God functions primarily as a creator....While the miniature mythical fable differs strikingly in character from Thomas’s early pieces of regional realism, it serves his current needs by permitting him to escape constraints of time and space, the better to conceptualize his supernatural subject. (5)

Gitzen is right in so far as Thomas is concerned to carve out a spiritual *place*, acres of the imagination which may be counterpoised against the sullen acres of the material world and where God may be felt as a positive force.

Indeed, the material world and its concomitant, the machine, are seen by Thomas as the chief life-destroying forces. “The Hearth” compares the “eternity” in a small room where “our love / Widens” with what is outside: “time and the

victims / Of time, travellers / To a new Bethlehem, statesmen / And scientists with their hands full / Of the gifts that destroy" (*Later Poems* 24). The exact nature of the "machine" Thomas inveighs against is somewhat vague. It may be associated with nuclear weapons, as in "Digest," where politicians plan the next war "exempted / From compact by the machine's / Exigencies" (*Later Poems* 19), or it may suggest simply the hum of tractors. In general, the machine appears as an overarching metaphor for the modern industrial world, as in E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops." "Digest" closes with a grim futuristic prediction:

The labour of the years
Was over; the children were heirs
To an instant existence. They fed the machine
Their questions, knowing the answers
Already, unable to apply them.

In "No Answer" (*Later Poems* 17), Thomas notes: "Over the creeds / And masterpieces our wheels go." Industrialism, of course, provides an invidious and rival creed, that of materialism. "Cain" is a parable of the materialistic way. The first murderer challenges God with the evidence of his easy materialistic faith: "I offered you / Clean things: the blond hair / Of the corn; the knuckled vegetables; the / Flowers" (*Later Poems* 22), but he does not understand God's more mystical relations with man, his need for the lamb "torn / From my own side." And thus Cain, in Thomas's reading, prepares the "doomed tree" of Christ's sacrifice.

"Invitation" may be read as Thomas's "Everlasting Nay" to the enticements of the material world. In it the speaker is tempted by two voices, one of which invites him to "Come / Back to the rain and manure / Of Siloh, to the small talk, / Of the wind, and the chapel's / Temptation" (*Later Poems* 15). All this seems pleasant enough in its way, though it suggests a world of material comfort and discomfort, the "temptation" of the chapel and "the pale, / Sickly half-smile of / The daughter of the village / Grocer." In a sense, it suggests the world of Thomas's early poems, stern and spiritually exhausted. The other voice offers the temptation of the modern world, "the streets, where the pound / Sings and the doors open / To its music, with life / Like an express train running / To time." This world is certainly not exhausted, but the evil of materialism provides its energy, and it is even more dangerous. The speaker's solution is to refuse either way, to "stay / Here, listening to them, blowing / On the small soul in my / Keeping with such breath as I have." The solution Thomas proposes is personal, and it involves him in a new exploration of interior space. As "The Kingdom" suggests, the laws of the material world do not apply when spiritual salvation is at issue:

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
Of your faith, green as a leaf. (*Later Poems* 35)

Thomas undercuts the claims of the material world by using its language, the language of advertising and the amusement park, ironically to describe the kingdom of heaven. It takes no time to get there, of course, because it is not in space and time; the journey is made through a self conceived in spiritual terms, "need only" and simple faith. In *Frequencies* (1978), Thomas explores this theme in a number of powerful poems. "Groping" (*Later Poems* 99) is an important statement of the need to find a spiritual place in the interior of the self:

Moving away is only to the boundaries
of the self. Better to stay here,
I said, leaving the horizons
clear. The best journey to make
is inward. It is the interior
that calls.

Like Eliot and Wordsworth, Thomas proposes to make a journey to the interior, and as in Kierkegaard, this journey involves a leap into the darkness.

But there are hands
there I can take, voices to hear
solider than the echoes
without. And sometimes a strange light
shines, purer than the moon,
casting no shadow, that is
the halo upon the bones
of the pioneers who died for truth.

This is Thomas in his most mystical mood, seeking like Wendell Berry a communal handshake in the dark. For Thomas, however, the darkness lies not in the furrowed earth but in the self. It is here, if anywhere, that God will speak to him. In "Shadows" (*Later Poems* 107), he writes: "I close my eyes. / The darkness implies your presence, / the shadow of your steep mind / on my world. I shiver

in it.” The interior blinds him not with light (the rational response that earlier prayers seemed to look for), but with “the splendour / of [God’s] darkness.” Indeed, “Shadows” is a culmination of the series of prayer poems. As in so many of them, Thomas listens and hears “the language / of silence, the sentence / without an end.” But here the silence is presented as paradoxical rather than frustrating, a consequence of God’s more perfect but humanly incomprehensible medium:

Is it I, then,
 who am being addressed? A God’s words
 are for their own sake; we hear
 at our peril. Many of us have gone
 mad in the mastering
 of your medium.

God does not betray us; we are betrayed by our own inability to comprehend Him, reflected in the frailties of our language. Indeed, human language, imperfect and corrupted, is increasingly seen by Thomas as the source of our religious disappointment. In “Directions” (*Later Poems* 131), he speaks of the “desert of language / we find ourselves in,” while in “Code” (*Later Poems* 144), he calls it a “duplicity / of language, that could name / what was not there.” “Minor” (*Later Poems* 149) argues that the language of the atheist Nietzsche has been discredited by history, while “ours / more quietly rusts / in autumnal libraries / of the spirit.” “Waiting” (*Later Poems* 111) questions the traditional language used to discuss and address God:

Face to face? Ah, no
 God; such language falsifies
 the relation. Nor side by side,
 nor near you, nor anywhere
 in time and space.

* * *

Young
 I pronounced you. Older
 I still do, but seldomer
 now, leaning far out
 over an immense depth, letting
 your name go and waiting,
 somewhere between faith and doubt,
 for echoes of its arrival.

The physical act of pronouncing God's name in human language will no longer do by itself. Thomas sounds for God in the "immense depth" of spiritual imagination, which is our only way of probing the boundaries of time and space. What one hopes for cannot be an answer in language, but an echo suggesting by its return from the boundaries of human imagination that a further dispensation has been reached.

Thomas views this exploration of interior space as an heroic act of travel before returning home, perhaps with something "to show / you have been there: a lock of God's / hair, stolen from him while he was / asleep; a photograph of the garden / of the spirit" ("Somewhere", *Later Poems* 73). Thomas's career can be seen as a series of such explorations, probing first the physical world and later the world of the interior, the acres of Wales and, equally stony, the acres of the imagination. The point of traveling, however, "is not / to arrive, but to return home / laden with pollen you shall work up / into honey the mind feeds on." One seeks "the proof / of experiences it would be worth dying for," and like Herakles one must wear "a shirt of fire" that can be "hung up now / like some rare fleece in the hall of heroes." For Thomas, such journeying now seems the essence of our lives, those "harbours / we are continually setting out / from" in search of "the one light that can cast such shadows."

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