

R.S. Thomas and the Problem of Welsh Identity

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1989

One aspect of R.S. Thomas's work which is perhaps most difficult for Americans to fathom is his relation to Welsh nationalism.¹ This rather arcane issue is complicated even further by the fact that Thomas is an Anglo-Welsh poet, indeed the guiding spirit of what is known as the Anglo-Welsh movement. Tony Bianchi has called Thomas "the dominant voice in the attempt by Anglo-Welsh writers to define an audience" (84). Throughout his career, Thomas has been faced with the difficult choice of writing poetry in what he considers a foreign language, or committing creative suicide. Having been born in "the capital of a fake nation" (*The Echoes Return Slow* 4), that is, Cardiff in English speaking southern Wales, Thomas did not learn Welsh until he was thirty, too late for it to be of use for poetry (*Selected Prose* 182). The resultant tensions in his work are sometimes overlooked by English critics, who would rather welcome Thomas as a distinguished "colonial" contributor to their own literature, and who thus concentrate for the most part on his celebrated movement in later years toward more inward, spiritual, and therefore more international themes. And yet even Thomas's later religious poetry should be understood in the context of his distinctly national concerns, as indeed many of the pieces in his *Selected Prose*, as well as passages in his most recent work, *The Echoes Return Slow*, make clear.

In order to facilitate our understanding of this problem, it will be helpful to consider first two passages by T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, which are quite well known in America. The first is Eliot's famous discussion in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* of the role of what he termed "satellite cultures." Eliot defines a satellite culture as "one which, for geographical and other reasons, has

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Figure 1: Thomas's Last Parish Church in Aberdaron

a permanent relation to a stronger one" (128). Satellite cultures of England are to be found, according to Eliot, in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. In a mediating if somewhat patronizing way, Eliot argues against the "complete absorption" of these cultures into the dominant culture. First of all, as Eliot notes:

it is the instinct of every living thing to persist in its own being. The resentment against absorption is sometimes most strongly felt, and most loudly voiced, by those individuals in whom it is united with an unacknowledged awareness of inferiority or failure; and on the other hand it is often repudiated by those individuals for whom adoption into the stronger culture has meant success....But when the testimony of both these types of individual has been discounted, we may say that any vigorous small people wants to preserve its individuality. (128)

Eliot's second argument against absorption is quite disingenuous. Since the satellite culture influences the stronger culture, it "plays a larger part in the world at

large than it could in isolation. For Ireland, Scotland and Wales to cut themselves off completely from England would be to cut themselves off from Europe and the world” (129). Furthermore, “it would be no gain whatever for English culture, for the Welsh, Scots and Irish to become indistinguishable from Englishmen....it is of great advantage for English culture to be constantly influenced from Scotland, Ireland and Wales” (129). It is all very neat: by offering what Thomas has called a “blood transfusion” to “the ageing body of English literature” (*Selected Prose* 52), the Welsh may help themselves by helping the English. (Indeed, Thomas would point out that the Welsh have offered a different sort of “blood transfusion” to England in two world wars.) On the other hand, the demeaning sense of second-class status, of being part of Europe, for instance, only through the medium of England, persists. Interestingly, Thomas recently expressed enthusiasm for the coming creation of a more unified European Economic Community, under which, he hopes, Wales will achieve a greater degree of autonomy (Personal Interview). Thomas looks upon Eliot’s arguments, the well-meaning intervention of an outsider turned “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion,” as a rather sly defense of the status quo in Britain that has continually deprived the Welsh of their heritage. Thomas looks on Anglo-Welsh literature not as a means of magnifying Welsh influence through English culture, nor as a charitable contribution to English culture, but “as a means of rekindling interest in the Welsh-language culture, and of leading people back to the mother-tongue” (*Selected Prose* 53). This hope that the Anglo-Welsh movement might “simply be a phase in the re-cymrification of Wales” (*Selected Prose* 33) has been an important part of Thomas’s thinking all through his career. To this day he maintains that Anglo-Welsh poets are writing in a foreign language.

We may appreciate how sharply this sense of being under the sway of a foreign language is felt by Welshmen like Thomas when we consider the famous scene in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where Stephen Dedalus and the Jesuit dean argue about the lamp:

—To return to the lamp, [the dean] said, the feeding of it is also a nice problem. You must choose the pure oil and you must be careful when you pour it in not to overflow it, not to pour in more than the funnel can hold.

—What funnel? asked Stephen.

—The funnel through which you pour the oil into your lamp.

—That? said Stephen. Is that called a funnel? Is it not a tundish?

—What is a tundish?

—That. The ... the funnel.

—Is it called a tundish in Ireland? asked the dean. I never heard the word in my life.

—It is called a tundish in Lower Drumcondra, said Stephen laughing, where they speak the best English.

—A tundish, said the dean reflectively. That is a most interesting word. I must look it up. Upon my word I must.

His courtesy of manner rang a little false, and Stephen looked at the English convert with the same eyes as the elder brother in the parable may have turned on the prodigal. (188-89)

The amused condescension of the dean about this “little word”² stirs up one of Stephen’s many epiphanies. Reflecting that the man to whom he was speaking was “a countryman of Ben Jonson,” he goes on to consider:

—The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (189)

Stephen Dedalus, as Joyce conceives him, is hardly a Gaelic speaking peasant, but as the representative of a “satellite culture,” he feels nonetheless that English can only be for him “an acquired speech,” and he chafes inwardly under its sway. I would suggest that a quite similar chafing underlies all of R.S. Thomas’s work, and that for him the necessity of writing poetry in English is not so much an opportunity to enjoy the stage of Europe as a tragic fate. “Let nobody imagine,” he has written, “that because there is so much English everywhere in Wales it is not a foreign language” (*Selected Prose* 181).

Thomas is quite clear about this in an article published in 1978 entitled “The Creative Writer’s Suicide.” In it he struggles to elucidate the difficult choices facing all writers in Wales and particularly the Anglo-Welsh:

²Ironically, the *Century Dictionary* and *OED* entries for “tundish” (or “tun-dish”) both indicate that the word has a long and honorable tradition in English, and was used by no less a countryman of Ben Jonson than Shakespeare himself

This devilish bilingualism! O, I know about all the arguments in favor of it: how it enriches one's personality, how it sharpens one's mind, how it enables one to enjoy the best of two worlds and so on. Very likely. But to anyone in Wales who desires to write, it is a millstone around his neck. (*Selected Prose* 179)

The Anglo-Welsh writer, according to Thomas, faces the choice of writing in English or "committing suicide as a true writer" (*Selected Prose* 180). The problems of the Anglo-Welsh writer are different from those of the writer of Welsh, whose main concern must be to save the culture of his nation from extinction, even at the cost of denying himself the possibility of writing at his best. Thomas believes that the Anglo-Welsh writer has it worse, for he "is neither one thing nor the other. He keeps going in a no-man's land between the two cultures" (*Selected Prose* 180). Obligated for various reasons to write in English, he cannot help "contributing to English culture, and deserves the strictures of his fellow-Welshmen on that account. If he endeavours to make his work more Welsh, he either gains the hostility of his English readers or loses their interest" (*Selected Prose* 180). Even when the Anglo-Welsh writer learns Welsh (and Thomas believes that a "true Welshman" will endeavor to do so), it is unlikely that he will know Welsh well enough to write poetry in the language. Indeed, this is the situation with Thomas himself: he "is constantly conscious of the fact that he speaks a foreign language" (*Selected Prose* 180), but equally aware of insuperable barriers between himself and what should be his mother tongue. Thomas's solution has been to write poetry in English and sermons and other prose pieces in Welsh, and indeed it may be seen that these latter are notably more nationalistic in tone than the poems. Yet such an easy distinction between the two sides of Thomas's work is neither comfortable nor profitable.

It is a critical commonplace to note a sharp division between Thomas's earlier and later poetry, beginning with *H'M* (1972) and *Laboratories of the Spirit* (1974). The earlier and more frequently anthologized poems deal very prominently with the peasants of the Welsh hill country and naturalistic scenes of village life in Wales. These stern portraits tend to be so brutally honest that one is tempted to ignore Thomas's own statement that in these poems he "wanted to propagandize, on behalf of the small farmer in his fields" (Lethbridge 42). The chief virtue Thomas seems to give these peasants (and even this is not unmixed) is a radical innocence in the face of their corrupters, the English industrialists and tourists who are slowly changing and taking away the peasants' way of life. Typical is the character known as Iago Prytherch, who cannot understand the English of the

tourists gazing at him in his field and who confesses to being “alone, exposed / In my own fields with no place to run / From your sharp eyes” (“Invasion of the Farm,” *Selected Poems* 37). The nationalist motive behind poems like these seems obvious enough, and it is interestingly with these early poems that Thomas is still largely represented in Anglo-Welsh anthologies (See Bianchi 85). English critics, on the other hand, have made much of Thomas’s movement in his later poetry toward more inward, spiritual themes. Many of these poems center on the search for a God whose “most consistent feature,” as Vimala Herman notes, “is his absence” (713). The scenes are no longer obviously those of Wales, but seem to suggest an inward landscape. Even those poems that inveigh against “the machine” and the intrusions of modern science use these images in a more general way. R. George Thomas is certainly right when he argues that in Thomas’s later poetry “the meditative ideas dominate over the visual images” (61). When language is at issue in these poems, it is not obviously the problem of the Welsh and English languages (as to some extent it is even in a poem like “Invasion of the Farm”), but the problem of the inadequacy of human language for addressing or communicating with God, as in “Waiting”:

Face to face? Ah, no
God; such language falsifies
the relation. Nor side by side,
nor near you, nor anywhere
in time and space. (*Later Poems* 111)

Indeed, one of Thomas’s chief concerns in his later poems has been what he calls “the duplicity / of language, that could name / what was not there” (“Code,” *Later Poems* 144), and yet remains our most intimate means and hope of sounding for God. But God, whose “chosen medium / of communication” (*Later Poems* 145) is silence, stands above the fray of languages, in which the poet cannot help but be embroiled. Thomas’s solution is not to deny his human perspective and answer silence with silence, but to advance “with all his vocabulary / intact to his final / overthrow by an untruth” (“The Vow,” *Later Poems* 188). We should keep in mind that for Thomas “all his vocabulary” involves both Welsh and English, as well as the silence which seems to be God’s own language. Indeed, there may be an interesting analogy between Thomas’s frustrations with earthly languages and his frustration in trying to interpret the silent language of God.

What I mean to suggest is that there is some danger in accepting a facile separation of Thomas’s Welsh or “regional” pieces and his later “spiritual” poetry.

In an interesting prose meditation entitled “Two Chapels” (1948), Thomas distinguishes an Anglicized Welsh chapel, Maes-yr-Onnen, from a more native Welsh chapel, Soar-y-Mynydd. The first he terms “the Chapel of the Spirit” and the second “the Chapel of the Soul.” Visiting the first chapel, he has “a glimpse of the spirit of man,” while in the second he sees “the soul of a special type of man, the Cymro or Welshman” (*Selected Prose* 46). Given a choice between the two, Thomas notes that he would prefer Soar-y-Mynydd on the grounds that “a nation that is fighting for its survival cannot afford to change its soul for some obscure spirituality no matter how excellent that may be from the individual’s point of view” (*Selected Prose* 47). Indeed, though he is “ready to admit the value of the spirit,” he warns that the spiritual is often held up “as something opposed to ideas of nationalism” (*Selected Prose* 47). The spiritual finds its special place in the towns, and “especially the towns in England,” which according to Thomas “are not characteristic of Wales; they are evidence of foreign influence, and the sooner they disappear the better” (*Selected Prose* 47). “Two Chapels,” of course, is an early piece, but its motives and tone are consistent with Thomas’s most recent efforts in prose. How then are we to account for his shift toward more spiritual poetry?

It is misleading to believe that Thomas has become less national as he has explored more spiritual themes. Rather, he seems to have become more comfortable with his own Welshness, and thus has felt freer to explore other areas in his poetry. As he once told Dylan Iorwerth in an interview for Radio Cymru:

When I started writing, Anglo-Welsh literature had come into existence, and I think every writer belonging to that school felt a certain necessity to tell the world “I am a Welshman”... By the time I reached Llŷn [his last ministry in Welsh speaking Aberdaron] I felt I had come home, I had achieved my aim—I changed my subject matter but became more of a Welshman, a straightforward Welshman, speaking Welsh every day, and therefore I was ready to act like a Welshman, so there was no need for me to write like a Welshman. (Quoted by Ned Thomas 16)

This passage touches on the central insecurity of Thomas as an Anglo-Welsh writer, the struggle to establish a truly Welsh identity while using as his primary vehicle what he considers a foreign language. As we have seen in “The Creative Writer’s Suicide,” this insecurity has continued to trouble Thomas even in the period of spiritual poetry. An interesting passage in the autobiographical piece from 1972, “The Paths Gone By,” gives us some idea of its intensity.

In the early 1940's, Thomas took over the parish of Manafon, a town near the English border where "most people spoke with a Shropshire accent using a strange admixture of Welsh idioms" (*Selected Prose* 139). Thomas speaks of himself at the time as "a proper little bourgeois, brought up delicately, with the mark of the church and the library on me" (*Selected Prose* 138). In the hill country around Manafon, however, he began to experience the ways of the Welsh hill farmers who would provide so many of his early subjects and to become versed, as it were, in country things. Although Manafon itself was basically English speaking, there were still those in the hill who could speak Welsh, and Thomas himself began to study Welsh with a neighboring minister. His first effort to express himself publicly in Welsh was an address at the Welsh-speaking minister's chapel:

I remember the evening: the chapel with its oil lamps, the wind blowing outside, and about twenty local farmers and their wives, come to listen to this freak—an Englishman who had learnt Welsh. Then off I went for about three quarters of an hour, like a ship being blown this way and that by the wind. Somehow or other I reached dry land, and after some discussion everyone went home. (*Selected Prose* 143)

Thomas's self-deprecating reference to himself as a "freak—an Englishman who had learnt Welsh" conveys his uneasy sense of being an outsider in his own culture. (Indeed, this sense of himself as an outsider informs much of the early poetry.) The "foreign" language here is the language he feels should be his mother tongue. Thomas's effort since then has been to remake himself into a real Welshman; that is, one in full possession of his native culture. Interestingly, his career as a minister suggests a gradual movement from English speaking parishes like Manafon to Welsh speaking Aberdaron near the tip of the remote Llŷn peninsula, and with it the increasing mastery of the Welsh language that freed him from the need to announce his Welshness through the subject matter of his poetry.

But even this dichotomous map of Thomas's career is no longer as simple as it once seemed. A writer like Thomas is always difficult to pin down with a neat formula. As I suggested above, Thomas's concern with the frailties of human language as a vehicle of discourse with God may well have its origin in his own ambiguous position as an Anglo-Welsh writer in the no-man's land between Welsh and English. What is clearly announced in the prose of the period finds its way indirectly into poems whose ostensible theme is purely religious. In his most recent volumes, *Experimenting With An Amen* (1986) and *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988), a new element may be detected. Thomas seems to be turning now to more explicitly autobiographical subject matter, the sort of thing he once reserved for

prose. The Welshness is thus again making itself felt in his work alongside the spirituality. *The Echoes Return Slow* is almost wholly given over to autobiographical meditation, with alternating prose and verse poems that challenge and answer each other on facing pages. One of the more beautiful of these poems considers Thomas's efforts to realize in the fullness of its particulars the soul of the country he once gazed at in wonder from the windows of an English train:

What had been blue shadows on a longed-for horizon, traced on an inherited background, were shown in time to contain this valley, this village and a church built with stones from the river, where the rectory stood, plangent as a mahogany piano. The stream was a bright tuning-fork in the moonlight. The hay-fields ran with a dark current. (*Echoes* 24)

The last sentence, however, closes the poem on a troubling note that we might consider characteristic of the Anglo-Welsh self-doubter: "The young man was sent unprepared to expose his ignorance of life in a leafless pulpit" (*Echoes* 24). For Thomas, this is not simply a confession of his "callow youth"; ignorance of life, in this instance, comprehends particularly ignorance of Welsh life, its customs, its language, and what one might call its fate. To a large degree, Thomas's real calling has been to recover this fate and to position himself in Wales. Only then could he begin to position himself before God.

"Sarn Rhiw" is a beautiful little poem about the medieval cottage overlooking Cardigan Bay in Rhiw, near Aberdaron, where Thomas has lived since his retirement:

So we know
she must have said something
to him—What language,
life? Oh, what language?

Thousands of years later
I inhabit a house
whose stone is the language
of its builders. Here

by the sea they said little.
But their message to the future
was: Build well. In the fire
of an evening I catch faces

staring at me. In April,
when light quickens and clouds
thin, boneless presences
flit through my room.

Will they inherit me
one day? What certainties
have I to hand on
like the punctuality

with which at the moon's
rising, the bay breaks
into a smile as though meaning
were not the difficulty at all? (*Experimenting* 26)

Early in his career, Thomas wrote that "You cannot live in the present, / At least not in Wales" ("Welsh Landscape," *Selected Poems* 16). "Sarn Rhiw," in its subtler way, treats this same notion, taking it a step further. Here Thomas senses not only the intersection of past and present, of daily life and history, but the intersection of human time and divine timelessness, the interplay of human endeavor and divine will. Once again, the concern is language in its various forms: the pre-human language of the earth and the creating God, as well as the "language" of the builders, those stones through which they address the future. These are the difficult, *acquired* languages with which Thomas, the sentient, transitory being of the present, must contend in contemplating his surroundings. As in "Welsh Landscape," Thomas is haunted by the presence of the past, the faces staring at him from the fire, the "boneless presences" waiting to "inherit" him. Indeed, the poem is not glibly comforting. The generations are bound together in a chain of inheritance, but Thomas wonders if his will not prove the weak link. Underlying all this is the idea that no man can (or should) escape the web of his culture. And for Thomas, such a culture is at once universal, involved with the deity, and particular, rooted in one human place. The cottage in Rhiw, the place Thomas has marked out as the end of his quest for Wales and Welsh identity, unites the spiritual with the local, the timeless with the timeful, and manifold identity with the personality of one man.

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